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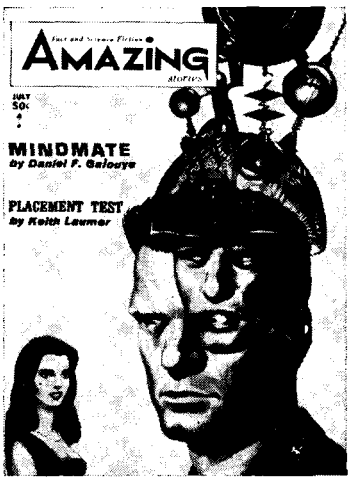

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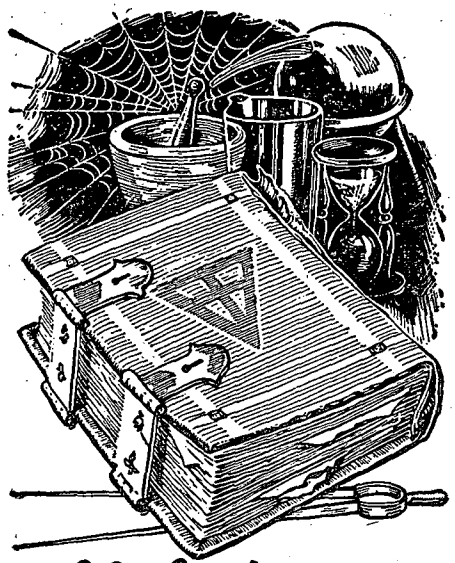

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Illustrating *The Kragen*

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WE may be, quietly, living in the days when the first tentative steps are being taken toward establishing the fact that humans do indeed have more than five senses. Not "psi," mind you . . . but another sensory organ.

The first stories came out of the laboratory of Dr. Richard Youtz, a psychology instructor at New York's Barnard College. He had read reports of Soviet research to the effect that one Russian girl could read print with her fingertips. This research had been confirmed by the Soviet Academy of Sciences, but Dr. Youtz remained skeptical. In discussing the report with a colleague, the latter mentioned a girl she once knew who could identify colors with her fingertips while blindfolded. Nagged by doubts about his scientific open-mindedness, Youtz eventually tracked down the girl—now Mrs. Ferrell Stanley of Flint, Mich.—and tested her for 60 hours.

Mrs. Stanley put her hands through double-thick black velveteen "sleeves" that open into a light-tight black box. There she identified with her fingertips various squares of colored cloth, sometimes by direct touch, sometimes through plastic or glass slides covering the cloth. In one triple series of tests Mrs. Stanley correctly "saw" 11, then 13, and then 12 out of 14 swatches. The odds against such identification by chance are several millions to one.

So far, the experimenter has no explanation. There seems to be no chemical, electrostatic or photoelectric effect involved. Mrs. Stanley doesn't know how she does it, either. Her only comment has been that "light colors are smoother or thinner or lighter in weight. The dark colors are thicker or rougher or heavier. Red, blue and green just *feel* like red, blue or green."

Now, since Dr. Youtz's first tests, there have been further developments. The Soviets reported they had found the "fingertip sight" sense in three persons; and that perhaps one person in every six has some slight degree

(*Continued on page 127*)

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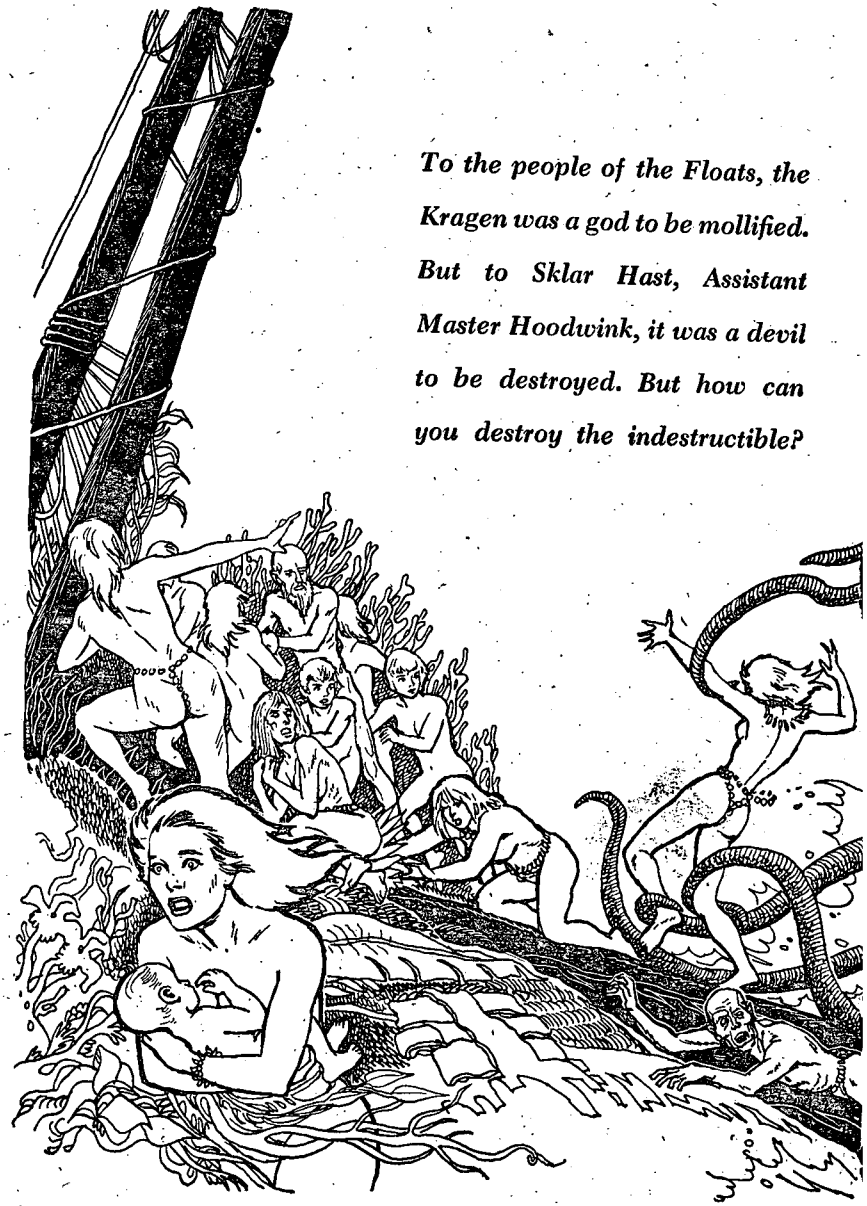
To the people of the Floats, the Kragen was a god to be mollified. But to Sklar Hast, Assistant Master Hoodwink, it was a devil to be destroyed. But how can you destroy the indestructible?



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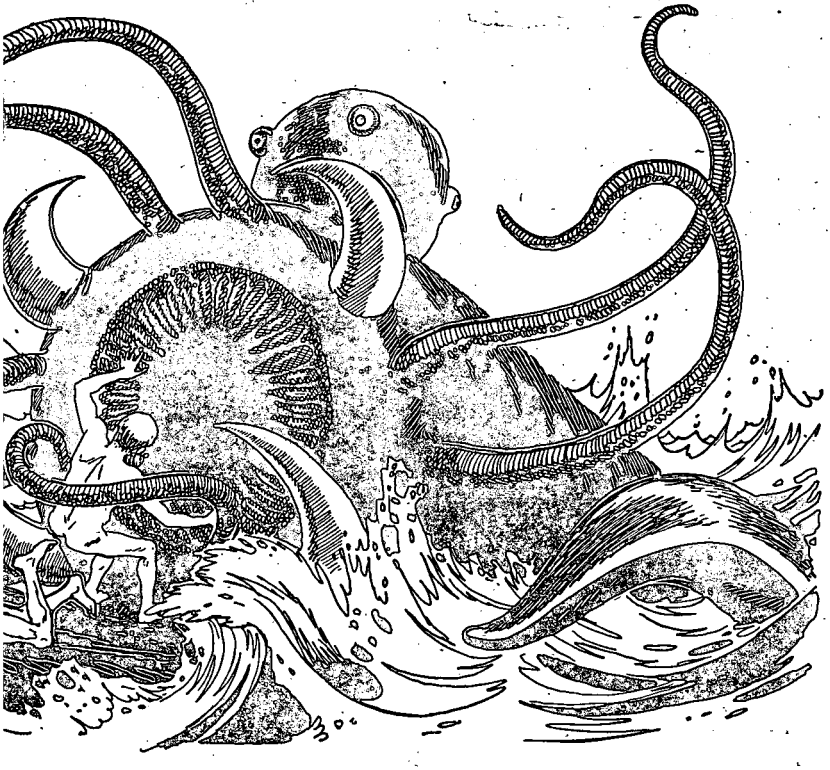
the KRAGEN

BY JACK VANCE

Illustrator EMSH

Chapter I

AMONG the people of the Floats caste distinctions were fast losing their old-time importance. The Anarchists and Procurers had disappeared altogether; inter-caste marriages were by no means uncommon, especially when they involved castes of approximately the same social status. Society of course was not falling into chaos; the Bezzlers and the Incendiaries



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still maintained their traditional aloofness; the Advertisermen still could not evade a subtle but nonetheless general disesteem, and where the castes were associated with a craft or trade, they functioned with undiminished effectiveness. The Swindlers comprised the vast majority of those who fished from coracles; Blackguards constructed all the sponge-arbors in every lagoon; the Hoodwinks completely monopolized the field of hood-winking. This last relationship always excited the curiosity of the young, who would inquire, "Which first: the Hoodwinks or hood-winking?" To which the elders customarily replied, "When the Ship of Space discharged our ancestors upon these blessed floats, there were four Hoodwinks among the Eighty-Three. Later, when the towers were built and the lamps established, there were hoods to wink, and it seemed nothing less than apposite that the Hoodwinks should occupy themselves at the trade. It may well be that matters stood so in the Outer Wildness, before the Escape. It seems likely. There were undoubtedly lamps to be flashed and hoods to be winked. Of course there is much we do not know, much concerning which the dicta are silent."

Whether or not the Hoodwinks had been drawn to the trade by virtue of ancient use, it was now the rare Hoodwink who did not in some measure find his vocation upon the towers, either as a rigger, a lamp-tender, or as full-fledged hoodwink.

Anothe caste, the Larceners, constructed the towers, which customarily stood sixty to ninety feet high at the center of the float, directly above the primary stalk of the sea-plant; there were usually four legs of woven withe, which passed through holes in the pad to join a stout stalk twenty or thirty feet below the surface. At the top of the tower was a cupola, with walls of split withe, a roof of gummed and laminated pad-skin. Yard-arms extending to either side supported lattices, each carrying nine lamps arranged in a square, three to the side, together with the hoods and trip-mechanisms. Within the cupola, windows afforded a view across the water to the neighboring floats—as much as two miles or as little as a quarter-mile distant. The Master Hoodwink sat at a panel. At his left hand were nine tap-rods, cross-coupled to lamp-hoods on the lattice to his right. Similarly the tap-rods at his right hand controlled the hoods to his left. By this means the configurations he formed and those he received, from his point of view, were of identical aspect and caused him no confusion. During the daytime, the lamps were not lit and

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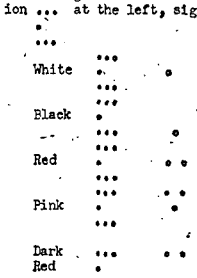
white targets served the same function. The hoodwink set his configuration with quick strokes of right and left hands, kicked the release, which thereupon flicked the hoods or shutters at the respective lamps or targets. Each configuration signified a word; the mastery of a lexicon and a sometimes remarkable dexterity were the Master Hoodwink's stock in trade. All could send at speeds approximating that of speech; all knew at least four thousand, and some six, seven or even nine thousand configurations. The folk of the floats could in varying degrees read the configurations, which were also employed in the keeping of the archives, and other communications, memoranda and messages*.

ON Tranque Float, at the extreme east of the group, the Master Hoodwink was one Chaezy Zander, a rigorous and exacting old man with a mastery of over eight thousand configurations. His first assistant, Sklar Hast, had well over five thousand configurations at his disposal. There were two further assistants, as well as three apprentices, two riggers, a lamp-tender and a maintenance witheweaver, this latter a Larcener. Chaezy Zander tended the tower from dusk until middle evening: the busy hours during which gossip, announcements, news and notifications regarding King Kragen flickered up and down the fifty-mile line of the floats.

Sklar Hast winked hoods during the afternoon; then, when Chaezy Zander appeared in the cupola, he looked to maintenance and supervised the apprentices. A relatively young man, Sklar Hast had achieved his status by working in accordance with a simple and uncomplicated policy: without compromise and with great tenacity he strove for excellence, and sought to instill the same standards into the apprentices. He was an almost brutally direct man, without affability, knowing nothing of either malice, guile, tact or patience. The apprentices disliked but respected him; Chaezy Zander considered him over-pragmatic and deficient in reverence for his betters, notably himself. Sklar Hast cared nothing one way or the other. Chaezy Zander must soon retire; in due course

*The orthography had been adopted in the earliest days and was highly systematic. The cluster at the left indicated the genus of the idea, the cluster at the right denoted the specific. In such a fashion ... at the left, signified color, and hence:



and so forth.

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Sklar Hast would become Master Hoodwink. He was in no hurry; on this placid, limpid, changeless world, time drifted rather than throbbed. In the meantime, life was easy and for the most part pleasant. Sklar Hast owned a small pad of which he was the sole occupant. The pad, a leaf of spongy tissue a hundred feet in diameter braced by tough woody radial ribs, floated in the lagoon, separated from the main float by twenty feet of water. Sklar Hast's hut was of standard construction: sea-plant withe bent and lashed, then sheathed with sheets of pad-skin, the tough near-transparent membrane peeled from the bottom of the sea-plant pad. All was then coated with well-aged varnish, prepared by boiling sea-plant sap until the water was driven off and the resins amalgamated.

On the pad grew other vegetation: shrubs rooted in the spongy tissue, a thicket of bamboo-like rods yielding a good-quality withe, epiphytes hanging from the central spike of the sea-plant —this rising twenty or thirty feet to terminate in a coarse white spore-producing organ. Most of the plants of the pad yielded produce of benefit to man: fruit, fiber, dye, drug or decorative foliage. On other pads the plants might be ordered according to aesthetic theory; Sklar hast had small taste in these matters, and the center of his pad was little more than an untidy copse of various stalks, fronds, tendrils and leaves, in various shades of black, green and rusty orange.

Sklar Hast reckoned himself a lucky man. As a Hoodwink by caste and assistant Master Hoodwink by trade he enjoyed a not inconsiderable prestige. Standing before his hut, Sklar Hast watched the gold and lavender dusk and its dark pastel reflection in the ocean. The afternoon rain had freshened and cooled the air; now the evening breeze arose to rustle the foliage and brush susurrations across the water . . . Chaezy Zander was growing old. Sklar Hast wondered how long the old man would persist in fulfilling the rigorous exactitude of his duties. True, he showed no lapse whatever in precision or flexibility of usage, but almost insensibly his speed was falling off. Sklar Hast could outwink him without difficulty should he choose to do so; a capability which Sklar Hast, for all his bluntness, had so far not demonstrated. Useless folly to irritate the old man! Sklar Hast suspected that even now he delayed his retirement mainly out of jealousy and antipathy toward Sklar Hast.

THERE was no hurry. Life seemed to extend ahead of him as wide and lucid as the dream-

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ing expanse of water and sky which filled his vision. On this water-world, which had no name, there were no seasons, no tides, no storms, no change, very little anxiety regarding time. Sklar Hast was currently testing five or six girls of orthodox Hoodwink background for marital suitability. In due course, he would make a choice, and enlarge his hut. And forever abandon privacy, Sklar Hast reflected wistfully. There was definitely no need for haste. He would continue to test such girls as were eligible, and perhaps a few others as well. Meanwhile, life was good. In the lagoon hung arbors on which grew the succulent sponge-like organisms which when cleaned, plucked and boiled, formed the staple food of the Float-folk. The lagoon teemed likewise with other edible fish, separated from the predators of the ocean by the enormous net which hung in a great hemisphere from various buoys, pads and the main float—this a complex of ancient pads, compressed, wadded and interlocked to create an unbroken surface five acres in area and varying from two feet to six feet in thickness. There was much other food available: spores from the sea-plant fruiting organ, from which a crusty bread could be baked. There were in addition other flowers, tendrils and bulbs, as well as the prized flesh of the gray-fish to take which the Swindlers must fare forth in their coracles and cunningly swindle from the ocean, which horizon to horizon, pole to pole, enveloped the entire surface of the world.

Sklar Hast turned his eyes up to the skies, where the constellations already blazed with magnificent ardor. To the south, half-up the sky, hung a cluster of twenty-five middle-bright stars, from which, so tradition asserted, his ancestors had fled in the Ship of Space, finally to reach the world of water. Eighty-three persons, of various castes, managed to disembark before the ship foundered and sank; the eighty-three had become twenty thousand, scattered east and west along fifty miles of floating sea-plant. The castes so jealously differentiated during the first few generations, with the Bezzlers at the top and the Advertisermen at the bottom, had now accommodated themselves to one another and were even intermingling. There was little to disturb the easy flow of life; nothing harsh nor unpleasant—except, perhaps, King Kragen.

Sklar Hast made a sour face and examined those three of his arbors which only two days before had been plucked clean by King Kragen, whose appetite as well as his bulk grew by the year. Sklar Hast scowled west-

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ward across the ocean, in the direction from which King Kragen customarily appeared, moving with long strokes of his four propulsive vanes, in a manner to suggest some vast, distorted, grotesquely ugly anthropoid form swimming by means of the breaststroke. There, of course, the resemblance to man ended. King Kragen's body was tough black cartilage, a cylinder on a rectangle, from the corners of which extended the vanes. The cylinder comprising King Kragen's main bulk opened forward in a maw fringed with four mandibles and eight palps, and aft in an anus. Atop this cylinder, somewhat to the front, rose a turret from which the four eyes protruded: two peering forward, two aft. During Sklar Hast's lifetime King Kragen had grown perceptibly, and now measured perhaps sixty feet in length. King Kragen was a terrible force for destruction, but luckily could be placated. King Kragen enjoyed copious quantities of sponges and when his appetite was appeased he injured no one and did no damage; indeed he kept the area clear of other marauding kragen, which either he killed or sent flapping and skipping in a panic across the ocean.

SKLAR HAST'S attention was attracted by a dark swirl in the water at the edge of the net: a black bulk surrounded by glistening cusps and festoons of starlit water. Sklar Hast ran forward to the edge of the pad, peered. No question about it! A lesser kragen was attempting to break the net that it might plunder the lagoon!

Sklar Hast shouted a curse, shook his fist, turned, ran at full speed across the pad. He jumped into his coracle, crossed the twenty feet of water to the central float. He delayed only long enough to tie the coracle to a stake formed of a human femur, then ran at top speed to the hoodwink tower.

A mile to the west the tower on Thrasneck Float flickered its lamps, the configurations coming with the characteristic style of Durdan Farr, the Thrasneck Master Hoodwink: "*. . . thirteen . . . bushels . . . of . . . salt . . . lost . . . when . . . a . . . barge . . . took . . . water . . . between . . . Sumber . . . and . . . Adelvine. . .*"

Sklar Hast climbed the ladder, burst into the cupola. He pointed to the lagoon. "A rogue, breaking the nets. I just saw him. Call King Kragen!"

Chaezy Zander instantly flashed the cut-in signal. His fingers jammed down rods, he kicked the release. "*Call . . . King . . . Kragen!*" he signaled. "*Rogue . . . in . . . Tranque . . . Lagoon!*"

On Thrasneck Float Durden

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Farr relayed the message to the tower on Bickle Float, and so along the line of floats to Sciona at the far west, who thereupon returned the signal: *"King . . . Kragen . . . is . . . nowhere . . . at . . . hand."*

Back down the line of towers flickered the message, returning to Tranque Float in something short of sixty seconds. Sklar Hast read the message as it left the Bickle Tower, before reaching Thrasneck, and rushed over to the side of the cupola, to peer down into the lagoon.

Others had now discovered the rogue kragen and set up a shout to the tower "Call King Kragen!" Sklar Hast shouted in return, "He can't be found!" Chaezy Zander, tight-lipped, was already dispatching another message: *"To . . . the . . . various . . . intercessors . . . along . . . the . . . line. Kindly . . . summon . . . King . . . Kragen . . . and . . . direct . . . him . . . to . . . Tranque . . . Float."*

Sklar Hast pointed and bellowed, "Look! The beast has broken the net! Where is Voidenvo?"

He swung down the ladder, ran to the edge of the lagoon. The kragen, a beast perhaps fifteen feet in length, was surging easily through the water, a caricature of a man performing the breast-stroke. Starlight danced and darted along the disturbed water, and so outlined the gliding black bulk. Sklar Hast cried out in fury: the brute was headed for his arbors, so recently devastated by the appetite of King Kragen! It could not be borne! He ran to his coracle, returned to his pad. Already the kragen had extended its palps and was feeling for sponges. Sklar Hast sought for an implement which might serve as a weapon; there was nothing to hand: a few articles fashioned from human bones and fish cartilage. Leaning against the hut was a boat-hook, a stalk ten feet long, carefully straightened, scraped, and seasoned, to which a hook-shaped human rib had been lashed. He took it up and now from the central pad came a cry of remonstrance: "Sklar Hast! What do you do?" This was the voice of Semon Voidenvo the Intercessor. Sklar Hast paid him no heed. He ran to the edge of the pad, jabbed the boat-hook at the kragen's turret. It scraped uselessly along resilient cartilage. The kragen swung up one of its vanes, knocked the pole aside. Sklar Hast jabbed the pole with all his strength at what he considered the kragen's most vulnerable area: a soft pad of receptor-endings directly above the maw. Behind him he heard Semon Voidenvo's outraged protest: "This is not to be done! This is not to be done! Desist!"

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THE kragen quivered at the blow, twisted its massive turret to gaze at Sklar Hast. Again it swung up its fore-vane, smashing the pole, slashing at Sklar Hast, who leapt back with inches to spare. From the central pad Semon Voidenvo bawled, "By no means molest the kragen; it is a matter for the King! We must respect the King's perquisites"

Sklar Hast stood back in fury as the kragen resumed its feeding. As if to punish Sklar Hast for his assault, it passed close beside the arbors, worked its vanes, and the arbors, sea-plant stalk lashed with fiber, collapsed. Sklar Hast groaned. "No more than you deserve," called out Semon Voidenvo with odious complacence. "You interfered with the duties of King Kragen, now your arbors are destroyed. This is justice."

"'Justice'? Bah!" bellowed Sklar Hast. "Where is King Kragen? You, Voidenvo the Intercessor! Why don't you summon the great gluttonous beast?"

"Come, come," admonished Semon Voidenvo. "This is not the tone in which to speak of King Kragen."

Sklar Hast thrust himself and his coracle back to the central float, where now stood several hundred folk of Tranque Float. He pointed. "Look. See that vile beast of the sea. He is plundering us of our goods. I say, kill him. I say that we need not suffer such molestation."

Semon Voidenvo emitted a high-pitched croak. "Are you insane? Someone, pour water on this maniac hoodwink, who has too long focused his eyes on flashing lights."

In the lagoon the kragen moved to the arbors of the Belrod family, deep-divers for stalk and withe, of the Advertiserman caste and prone to a rude and surly vulgarity. The Belrod elder, Poe, a squat large-featured man, still resilient and vehement despite his years, emitted a series of hoots, intended to distract the kragen, which instead tore voraciously at the choicest Belrod sponges.

"I say, kill the beast!" cried Sklar Hast. "The King despoils us, must we likewise feed all the kragen of the ocean?"

"Kill the beast!" echoed the younger Belrods.

Semon Voidenvo gesticulated in vast excitement, but Poe Belrod shoved him roughly aside. "Quiet, let us listen to the hoodwink. How would we kill the kragen?"

"Come! I will show you how!"

Thirty or forty men followed him, mostly Swindlers, Advertisermen, Blackguards and Extorters. The remainder hung dubiously back. Sklar Hast led the way to a pile of poles intended for the construction of a store-

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house. Each pole, fabricated from withes laid lengthwise and bound in glue, was twenty feet long by eight inches in diameter, and combined great strength with lightness.

Sklar Hast found rope, worked with vicious energy. "Now—lift! Across to my pad!"

EXCITED by his urgency, the men shouldered the pole, carried it to the lagoon, floated it across to Sklar Hast's pad. Then, crossing in coracles, they dragged the pole up on the pad and carried it across to the edge of the lagoon. At Sklar Hast's direction, they set it down with one end resting on the hard fiber of a rib. "Now," said Sklar Hast. "Now we kill the kragen." He made a noose in the end of a light hawser, advanced toward the kragen, which watched him through the rear-pointing eyes of its turret. Sklar Hast moved slowly, so as not to alarm the creature, which continued to pluck sponges with a contemptuous disregard.

Sklar Hast, crouching, approached the edge of the pad. "Beast!" he called. "Ocean brute! Come closer. Come." He bent, splashed water at the kragen. Provoked, it surged toward him. Sklar Hast waited, and just before it swung its vane, he tossed the noose over its turret. He signaled his men. "Now!" They heaved on the line, dragged the thrashing kragen through the water. Sklar Hast guided the line to the end of the pole. The kragen surged suddenly forward; in the confusion and the dark the men heaving on the rope fell backward. Sklar Hast seized the slack, and dodging a murderous slash of the kragen's forevane he flung a hitch around the end of the pole. He danced back. "Now!" he called. "Pull, pull! Both lines! The beast is as good as dead!"

On each of a pair of lines tied to the head of the pole fifteen men heaved. The pole raised up on its base; the line tautened around the kragen's turret, the men dug in their heels, the base of the pole bit into the hard rib. The pole raised, braced by the angle of the ropes. With majestic deliberation the thrashing kragen was lifted from the water and swung up into the air. From those watching on the central pad came a murmurous moan of fascination and dread.

The kragen made gulping noises, reached its vanes this way and that, to no avail. Sklar Hast surveyed the creature, somewhat at a loss as how to proceed. The project thus far had gone with facility: what next? The men were looking at the kragen in awe, uncomfortable at their own daring, and already were stealing furtive glances out

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over the ocean. Perfectly calm, it glistened with the reflections of the blazing constallations. Sklar Hast thought to divert their attention. "The nets!" he called out to those on the float. "Where are the Extorters? Repair the nets before we lose all our fish! Are you helpless?"

Certain net-makers, a trade dominated by the Extorter caste, detached themselves from the group, went out in coracles to repair the broken net.

Sklar Hast returned to a consideration of the dangling kragen. At his orders the ropes supporting the tilted pole were made fast to ribs on the surface of the pad; the men now gathered gingerly about the dangling kragen, and speculated as to the best means to kill the creature. Perhaps it was already dead? Someone posed the question; a lad of the Belrods prodded the kragen with a length of stalk and suffered a broken collar-bone from a quick blow of the fore-vane.

Sklar Hast stood somewhat apart, studying the creature. Its hide was tough; its cartilaginous tissue even tougher. He sent one man for a boat-hook, another for a sharp femur-stake, and from the two fashioned a spear.

The kragen hung limp, the vanes swaying, occasionally twitching. Sklar Hast moved forward cautiously, touched the point of the spear to the side of the turet, thrust with all his weight. The point entered the tough hide perhaps half an inch, then broke. The kragen jerked, snorted, a vane slashed out. Sklar Hast sensed the dark flicker of motion, dodged and felt the air move beside his face. The spear-shaft hurtled out over the pond; the vane struck the pole on which the kragen hung, bruising the fibers.

"What a quarrelsome beast!" declared Sklar Hast. "Bring more rope; we must prevent any further such demonstrations."

FROM the main float came a harsh command: "You are mad-men; why do you risk the displeasure of King Kragen? I decree that you desist from your rash acts!"

This was the voice of Ixon Myrex, the Tranque Arbiter, a Bezzler of great physical power and moral conviction, a man with recognized powers and large prestige. Sklar Hast could not ignore Ixon Myrex as he had Semon Voidenvo. He considered the dangling kragen, looked about at the dubious faces of his comrades. They were hesitating; Ixon Myrex was not a man to be trifled with. Sklar Hast walked truculently to the edge of the pad, peered across the intervening water to the shape of Ixon Myrex.

"The kragen is destroying our

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arbors, Arbiter Myrex. The King is slothful about his duties, hence—"

Ixon Myrex's voice shook with wrath. "That is no way to speak! You violate the spirit of our relationship with King Kragen!"

Sklar Hast said in a reasonable voice, "King Kragen is nowhere to be seen. The Intercessors who claim such large power run back and forth in futility. We must act for ourselves. Cross the water to my pad. Join us in killing this ravenous beast."

Ixon Myrex held up his hands, which trembled in indignation. "Return the kragen to the lagoon, that thereby—"

"That thereby it may destroy more arbors?" demanded Sklar Hast. "This is not the result I hope for." He took a deep breath and made his decision. "Where is the rope?"

Arbiter Myrex called out in his sternest tones, "You men on the pad! This is how I interpret the customs of Tranque Float: the kragen must be restored to the water, with all haste. No other course is consistent with custom."

Sklar Hast waited. There was an uneasy stirring among the men. He said nothing, but taking up the rope, formed a noose. He crawled forward, flipped up the noose to catch a dangling vane, then crawling back and rising to his feet he circled the creature, binding the dangling vanes. The kragen's motions became increasingly constricted and finally were reduced to spasmodic shudders. Sklar Hast approached the creature from the rear, careful to remain out of reach of mandibles and palps, and made the bonds secure. "Now—the vile beast can only squirm. Lower it to the pad and we will find a means to make its end." The guy ropes were shifted, the pole tilted and swung; the kragen fell to the surface of the pad, where it lay passive, palps and mandibles moving slightly in and out. It showed no agitation, nor discomfort; perhaps it felt none: the exact degree of the kragen's sensitivity and ratiocinative powers had never been determined.

IN the east the sky was lightening where the cluster of flaring blue and white suns known as Phocan's Cauldron began to rise. The ocean glimmered with a leaden sheen, and the folk who stood on the central pad began to glance furtively along the obscure horizon, muttering and complaining. Some few called out encouragement to Sklar Hast, recommending the most violent measures against the kragen. Between these and certain others furious arguments raged. Chaezy Zander had descended from the tower, to join Semon Voidenvo and Ixon Myrex, obvi-

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ously in disapproval of Sklar Hast's activity. Of the Caste Elders only Elmar Pronave, Jackleg and Master Witheweaver, defended Sklar Hast and his unconventional acts.

Sklar Hast ignored all. He sat watching the black hulk with vast distaste, furious with himself for having become involved in so perilous a project. What had been gained? The kragen had broken his arbors; he had revenged himself and prevented more destruction. On the other hand he had incurred the ill-will of the most influential folk of the Float, including Ixon Myrex and Chaezy Zander: no small matter. He likewise had involved those others who had trusted him and looked to him for leadership, and toward whom he now felt responsibility.

He rose to his feet. There was no help for it; the sooner the beast was disposed of, the more quickly life would return to normal. He approached the kragen, examined it gingerly. The mandibles quivered in their anxiety to sever his torso; Sklar Hast stayed warily to the side. How to kill the beast?

Elmar Pronave crossed over from the main float the better to examine the kragen. He was a tall man with a high-bridged broken nose and black hair worn in the two ear-plumes of the old Procurer Caste, now no longer in existence save for a few aggressively unique individuals scattered through the floats, who used the caste-marks to emphasize their emotional detachment.

Pronave circled the hulk, kicked at the rear vane, bent to peer into one of the staring eyes. "If we could cut it up, its parts might be of some use."

"The hide is too tough for our knives," growled Sklar Hast. "There's no neck to be strangled."

"There are other ways to kill."

Sklar Hast nodded. "We could sink the beast into the depths of the ocean—but what to use for weight? Bones? Far too valuable. We could load bags with ash, but there is not that much ash to hand. We could burn every hut on the float as well as the hoodwink tower, and still not secure sufficient. To burn the kragen would require a like mountain of fuel."

A young Larcener who had worked with great enthusiasm during the trapping of the kragen spoke forth: "Poison exists! Find me poison, I will fix a capsule to a stick and push it into the creature's maw!"

Elmar Pronave gave a sardonic bark of laughter. "Agreed; poisons exist, hundreds of them, derived from various sea-plants and animals—but which are sufficiently acrid to destroy this beast? And where is it to be had?

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I doubt if there is that much poison nearer than Sankeston Float."

SKLAR HAST went again to survey the black hulk, and now Phocan's Cauldron, rising into the sky, revealed the kragen in fuller detail. Sklar Hast examined the four blind-seeming eyes in the turret, the intricate construction of the mandibles and tentacles at the maw. He touched the turret, peered at the dome-shaped cap of chitin which covered it. The turret itself seemed laminated, as if constructed of stacked rings of cartilage, the eyes protruding fore and aft in inflexible tubes of a rugose harsh substance. Others in the group began to crowd close; Sklar Hast jumped forward, thrust at a young Felon boat-builder, but too late. The kragen flung out a palp, seized the youth around the neck. Sklar Hast cursed, heaved, tore; the clenched palp was unyielding. Another curled out for his leg; Sklar Hast kicked, danced back, still heaving upon the Felon's writhing form. The kragen drew the Felon slowly forward, hoping, so Sklar Hast realized, to pull him within easier reach. He loosened his grip, but the kragen allowed its palp to sway back to encourage Sklar Hast, who once more tore at the constricting palp. Again the kragen craftily drew its captive and Sklar Hast forward; the second palp snapped out once more and this time coiled around Sklar Hast's leg. Sklar Hast dropped to the ground, twisted himself around and broke the hold, though losing skin. The kragen petulantly jerked the Felon to within reach of its mandible, neatly snipped off the young man's head, tossed body and head aside. A horrified gasp came from the watching crowd. Ixon Myrex bellowed, "Sklar Hast, a man's life is gone, due to your savage obstinacy! You have much to answer for! Woe to you!"

Sklar Hast ignored the imprecation. He ran to his hut, found chisels and a mallet with a head of dense sea-plant stem, brought up from a depth of two hundred feet.* The chisels had blades of pelvic bone ground sharp against a board gritted with the silica husks of foraminifera. Sklar Hast returned to the kragen, put the chisel against the pale lamellum between the chitin dome and the foliations of the turret. He tapped; the chisel penetrated; this, the substance of a new layer being added to the turret, was

*The Advertiserman takes below a pulley which he attaches to a sea-plant stalk. By means of ropes, buckets of air are pulled down, allowing him to remain under water as long as he chooses. Using two such systems, alternately lowered, the diver can descend to a depth of two hundred feet, where the sea-plant stalks grow dense and rigid.

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relatively soft, the consistency of cooked gristle. Sklar Hast struck again; the chisel cut deep. The kragen squirmed.

Sklar Hast worked the chisel back out, made a new incision beside the first, then another and another, working around the periphery of the chitin dome, which was approximately two feet in diameter. The kragen squirmed and shuddered, whether in pain or apprehension it alone knew. As Sklar Hast worked around to the front, the palps groped back for him, but he shielded himself behind the turret, and finally gouged out the lamellum completely around the circumference of the turret.

His followers watched in awe and silence; from the main float came somber mutters, and occasional whimpers of superstitious dread from the children.

THE channel was cut; Sklar handed chisel and mallet back to Elmar Pronave. He mounted the body of the kragen, bent his knees, hooked fingers under the edge of the chitin dome, heaved. The dome ripped up and off, almost unbalancing Sklar Hast. The dome rolled down to the pad, the turret stood like an open-topped cylinder; within were coils and loops of something like dirty gray string. There were knots here, nodes there, on each side a pair of kinks, to the front a great tangle of kinks and loops.

Sklar Hast looked down in interest. He was joined by Elmar Pronave. "The creature's brain, evidently," said Sklar Hast. "Here the ganglions terminate. Or perhaps they are merely the termini of muscles."

Elmar Pronave took the mallet and with the handle prodded at a node. The kragen gave a furious jerk. "Well, well," said Pronave. "Interesting indeed." He prodded further: here, there. Every time he touched the exposed ganglions the kragen jerked. Sklar Hast suddenly put out his hand to halt him. "Notice. On the right, those two long loops; likewise on the left. When you touched this one here, the fore vane jerked." He took the mallet, prodded each of the loops in turn; and in turn each of the vanes jerked.

"Aha!" declared Elmar Pronave. "Should we persist, we could teach the kragen to jig."

"Best we should kill the beast," said Sklar Hast. "Day is approaching and who knows but what . . ." From the float sounded a sudden low wail, quickly cut off as by the constriction of breath. The group around the kragen stirred; someone vented a deep sound of dismay. Sklar Hast jumped up on the kragen, looked around. The population on the float were staring to sea; he looked likewise, to see King

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Kragen. He floated under the surface, only his turret above water. The eyes stared forward, each a foot across: lenses of tough crystal behind which flickered milky films and pale blue sheen. King Kragen had either drifted close down the trail of Phocan's Cauldron on the water, or approached sub-surface.

Fifty feet from the lagoon nets he let his bulk come to the surface: first the whole of his turret, then the black cylinder housing the maw and the digestive process, finally the great flat subbody: this, five feet thick, thirty feet wide, sixty feet long. To the sides protruded the propulsive vanes, thick as the girth of three men. Viewed from dead ahead King Kragen appeared a deformed ogre swimming the breast-stroke. His forward eyes, in their horn tubes, were turned toward the float of Sklar Hast, and seemed fixed upon the hulk of the mutilated kragen. The men stared back, muscles stiff as sea-plant stalk. The kragen which they had captured, once so huge and formidable, now seemed a miniature, a doll, a toy. Through its after-eyes it saw King Kragen, and gave a fluting whistle, a sound completely lost and desolate.

Sklar Hast suddenly found his tongue. He spoke in a husky urgent tone. "Back. To the back of the pad. Swim to the float."

FROM the main float rose the voice of Semon Voidenvo the Intercessor. In quavering tones he called out across the water: "Behold, King Kragen, the men of Tranque Float! Now we denounce the presumptuous bravado of these few heretics! Behold, this pleasant lagoon, with its succulent sponges, devoted to the well-being of the magnanimous King Kragen—" the reedy voice faltered as King Kragen twitched his great vanes and eased forward. The great eyes stared without discernible expression, but behind there seemed to be a leaping and shifting of pale pink and pale blue lights. The folk on the float drew back as King Kragen breasted close to the net. With a twitch of his vanes, he ripped the net; two more twitches shredded it. From the folk on the float came a moan of dread; King Kragen had not been mollified.

King Kragen eased into the lagoon, approached Sklar Hast's pad which now was deserted except for the helpless kragen. The bound beast thrashed feebly, sounded its fluting whistle. King Kragen reached forth a palp, seized it, lifted it into the air, where it dangled helplessly. King Kragen drew it contemptuously close to his great mandibles, chopped it quickly into slices of gray and black gristle. These he tossed away, out into the ocean.

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He paused to drift a moment, to consider. Then he surged on Sklar Hast's pad. One blow of his fore-vane demolished the hut, another cut a great gouge in the pad. The after-vanes thrashed among the arbors; water, debris, broken sponges boiled up from below. King Kragen thrust again, wallowed completely up on the pad, which slowly crumpled and sank beneath his weight.

King Kragen pulled himself back into the lagoon, cruised back and forth destroying arbors, shredding the net, smashing huts of all the pads of the lagoon. Then he turned his attention to the main float, breasting up to the edge. For a moment he eyed the population, which started to set up a terrified keening sound, then thrust himself forward, wallowed up on the float, and the keening became a series of hoarse cries and screams. The folk ran back and forth with jerky scurrying steps.

King Kragen bulked on the float like a toad on a lily-pad. He struck with his vanes; the float split. The hoodwink tower, the great structure so cunningly woven, so carefully contrived, tottered. King Kragen lunged again, the tower toppled, falling into the huts along the north edge of the float.

King Kragen floundered across the float. He destroyed the granary, and bushels of yellow meal laboriously scraped from seaplant pistils streamed into the water. He crushed the racks where stalk, withe and fiber were stretched and flexed; he dealt likewise with the rope-walk. Then, as if suddenly in a hurry, he swung about, heaved himself to the southern edge of the float. A number of huts and thirty-two of the folk, mostly aged and very young, were crushed or thrust into the water and drowned.

King Kragen regained the open sea. He floated quietly a moment or two, palps twitching in the expression of some unknowable emotion. Then he moved his vanes and slid off across the calm ocean.

TRANQUE Float was a devastation, a tangle, a scene of wrath and grief. The lagoon had returned to the ocean, with the arbors reduced to rubbish and the shoals of food-fish scattered. Many huts had been crushed. The hoodwink tower lay toppled. Of a population of four hundred and eighty, forty-three were dead, with as many more injured. The survivors stood blank-eyed and limp, unable to comprehend the full extent of the disaster which had come upon them.

Presently they roused themselves, and gathered at the far western edge where the damage had been the least. Ixon Myrex sought through the faces, even-

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tually spied Sklar Hast sitting on a fragment of the fallen hoodwink tower. He raised his hand slowly, pointed. "Sklar Hast! I denounce you. The evil you have done to Tranque Float cannot be uttered in words. Your arrogance, your callous indifference to our pleas, your cruel and audacious villainy—how can you hope to expiate them?"

Sklar Hast looked off across the sea.

"In my capacity as Arbiter of Tranque Float, I now declare you to be a criminal of the basest sort, together with all those who served you as accomplices, and most noteworthy Elmar Pronave! Elmar Pronave, show your shameful face! Where do you hide?"

But Elmar Pronave had been drowned and did not answer.

Chaezy Zander limped across the area to stand beside Ixon Myrex. "I likewise denounce Sklar Hast and declare him assistant master hoodwink no longer. He has disgraced his caste and his calling: I hereby eject him from the fellowship of both!"

Semon Voidenvo the Intercessor rose to speak. "Denunciations are not enough. King Kragen, in wreaking his terrible but just vengeance, intended that the primes of the deed should die. I now declare the will of King Kragen to be death, by either strangulation or bludgeoning, of Sklar Hast and all his accomplices."

"Not so fast," said Sklar Hast at last. "It appears to me that a certain confusion is upon us. Two kragen, a large one and small one, have injured us. I, Sklar Hast, and my friends, are those who hoped to protect the float from depredation. We failed. We are not criminals; we are simply not as strong nor as wicked as King Kragen."

"You are aware," Semon Voidenvo persisted, "that King Kragen reserves to himself the duty of guarding us from the lesser kragen? You are aware that in assaulting the kragen, you in effect assaulted King Kragen?"

Sklar Hast considered. "We will need more powerful tools than ropes and chisels to kill King Kragen."

Semon Voidenvo turned away speechless. The people looked apathetically toward Sklar Hast. Few seemed to share the indignation of the elders.

Ixon Myrex sensed the general feeling of misery and fatigue. "This is no time for recrimination. There is work to be done, vast work; all our structures to be rebuilt, our tower rendered operative, our net rewoven. But Sklar Hast's crime must not go without appropriate punishment. I therefore propose a Grand Convocation to take place one week from today, on Apprise Float.

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The fate of Sklar Hast and his gang will be inexorably decided by a Council of Elders."

Chapter II

THE ocean had never been plumbed. At two hundred feet, the maximum depth attempted by stalk-cutters and pod-gatherers, the sea-plant stems were still a tangle. One Waller Murvén, a man half-daredevil, half-maniac, had descended to three hundred feet, and in the indigo gloom noted the stalks merging to disappear into the murk as a single great trunk. But attempts to sound the bottom, by means of a line weighted with a bag of bone chippings, were unsuccessful. How then had the sea-plants managed to anchor themselves? Some supposed that the plants were of great antiquity, and had developed during a time when the water was much lower. Others conjectured a sinking of the ocean bottom; still others were content to ascribe the feat to an innate tendency of the sea-plants.

Of all the floats Apprise was the largest and one of the first to be settled. The central agglomeration was perhaps seven acres in extent; the lagoon was bounded by thirty or forty smaller pads. Apprise Float was the traditional site of the convocations, which occurred at approximately yearly intervals and which were attended by the active and responsible adults of the system. Drama and excitement attended the holding of the convocations. The folk of the floats seldom ventured far from home, since it was widely believed that King Kragen disapproved of travel. He ignored the coracles of swindlers, and also the rafts of withe or stalk which occasionally passed back and forth between the floats; but on various occasions he had demolished boats or coracles which seemed to have no ostensible business or purpose. Coracles conveying folk to a convocation had never been molested, however, even though King Kragen always seemed aware that a convocation was in progress, and often watched proceedings from a distance of a half-mile or so. How King Kragen gained his knowledge was a matter of great mystery: some asserted that on every float lived a man who was a man in semblance only: who inwardly was a manifestation of King Kragen. It was through this man, according to the superstition, that King Kragen knew what transpired on the floats.

For three days preceding the convocation there was incessant flickering along the line of the hoodwink towers; the destruction of Tranque Float was reported in full detail, together

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with Ixon Myrex's denunciation of Sklar Hast and Sklar Hast's rebuttal. On each of the floats there was intense discussion and a certain degree of debate. But since, in most cases, the Arbiter and the Intercessor of each float inveighed against Sklar Hast, there was little organized sentiment in his favor.

On the morning of the convocation, early, before the morning sky showed blue, coracles full of folk moved between the floats. The survivors of the Tranque Float disaster, who for the most part had sought refuge on Thrasneck and Bickle, were among the first underway, as were the folk from Almack and Sciona, to the far west.

All morning the coracles shuttled back and forth between the floats; shortly before noon the first groups began to arrive on Apprise. Each group wore the distinctive emblems of its float; and those who felt caste distinction important likewise wore the traditional hair-stylings, forehead plaques and dorsal ribbons; otherwise all dressed in much the same fashion: shirts and pantlets of coarse linen woven from sea-plant fiber; sandals of rug-fish leather, ceremonial gauntlets and epaulettes of sequins cut from the kernels of a certain half-animal, half-vegetable mollusc.

As the folk arrived they trooped to the famous old Apprise Inn where they refreshed themselves at a table on which was set forth a collation of beer, pod-cakes and pickled fingerlings; after which the newcomers separated to various quarters of the float, in accordance with traditional caste distinctions.

In the center of the float was a rostrum and on benches surrounding the notables took their places: craft-masters, caste-chiefs, Arbiters and Intercessors. The rostrum was at all times open to any who wished to speak, so long as they gained the sponsorship of one of the notables. The first speakers at the convocations customarily were elders intent on exhorting the younger folk to excellence and virtue; so it was today. An hour after the sun had reached the zenith the first speaker made his way to the rostrum; a portly old Incendiary from Maudelinda Float who had in just such a fashion opened the speaking at the last five convocations. He sought and was perfunctorily granted sponsorship—by now his speeches were regarded as a necessary evil; he mounted the rostrum and began to speak. His voice was rich, throbbing, voluminous; his periods were long, his sentiments well-used, his illuminations unremarkable:

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"We meet again; I am pleased to see so many of the faces which over the years have become familiar and well-beloved; and alas there are certain faces no more to be seen, those who have slipped away to the Bourne, many untimely, as those who suffered punishment only these few days past before the wrath of King Kragen, of which we all stand in awe. A dreadful circumstance thus to provoke the majesty of this Elemental Reality; it should never have occurred; it would never have occurred if all abided by the ancient disciplines. Why must we scorn the wisdom of our ancestors? Those noble and most heroic of men who dared to revolt against the tyranny of the mindless helots, seize the Ship of Space which was taking them to brutal confinement, and seek a haven here on this blessed world! Our ancestors knew the benefits of order and rigor: they designated the castes and set them to tasks for which they presumably had received training on the Homeworld. In such a fashion the Swindlers were assigned the task of swindling fish; the Hoodwinks were set to winking hoods; the Incendiaries, among whom I am proud to number myself, wove ropes; while the Bezzler gave us the Intercessors who have procured the favor and benevolent guardianship of King Kragen.

"Like begets like; characteristics persist and distill: why then are the castes crumbling and giving way to helter-skelter disorder? I appeal to the youth of today: read the old books: the Dicta. Study the artifacts in the Museum, renew your dedication to the system formulated by our forefathers: you have no heritage more precious than your caste identity!"

The old Incendiary spoke on in such a vein for several minutes further, and was succeeded by another old man, a former Hoodwink of good reputation, who worked until films upon his eyes gave one configuration much the look of another. Like the old Incendiary he too urged a more fervent dedication to the old-time values. "I deplore the sloth and pudicity of today's youth! We are becoming a race of sluggards! It is sheer good fortune that King Kragen protects us from the gluttony of the lesser kragen. And what if the tyrants of out-space discovered our haven and sought once more to enslave us? How would we defend ourselves? By hurling fish-heads? By diving under the floats in the hope that our adversaries would follow and drown themselves? I propose that each float form a militia, well-trained and equipped with darts and spears, fashioned from the most durable stalk obtainable!"

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THE old Hoodwink was followed by the Sumber Float Intercessor, who courteously suggested that should the outspace tyrants appear, King Kragen would be sure to visit upon them the most poignant punishments, the most absolute of rebuffs, so that the tyrants would flee in terror never to return. "King Kragen is mighty, King Kragen is wise and benevolent, unless his dignity is impugned, as in the detestable incident at Tranque Float, where the wilfulness of a bigoted free-thinker caused agony to many." Now he modestly turned down his head. "It is neither my place nor my privilege to propose a punishment suitable to so heinous an offense as the one under discussion. But I would go beyond this particular crime to dwell upon the underlying causes; namely the bravado of certain folk, who ordain themselves equal or superior to the accepted ways of life which have served us so well so long . . ."

Presently he descended to the float. His place was taken by a somber man of stalwart physique, wearing the plainest of garments. "My name is Sklar Hast," he said. "I am that so-called 'bigoted free-thinker' just referred to. I have much to say, but I hardly know how to say it. I will be blunt. King Kragen is not the wise beneficient guardian the Intercessors like to pretend. King Kragen is a gluttonous beast who every year becomes more enormous and more gluttonous. I sought to kill a lesser kragen which I found destroying my arbors; by some means King Kragen learned of this attempt and reacted with insane malice."

"Hist! Hist!" cried the Intercessors from below. "Shame! Outrage!"

"Why does King Kragen resent my effort? After all, he kills any lesser kragen he discovers in the vicinity. It is simple and self-evident. King Kragen does not want men to think about killing kragen for fear they will attempt to kill him. I propose that this is what we do. Let us put aside this ignoble servility, this groveling to a sea-beast, let us turn our best efforts to the destruction of King Kragen."

"Irresponsible maniac!" "Fool!" "Vile-minded ingrate!" called the Intercessors in wrath.

Sklar Hast waited, but the invective increased in volume. Finally Phyral Berwick the Apprise Arbiter mounted the rostrum and held up his hands. "Quiet! Let Sklar Hast speak! He stands on the rostrum; it is his privilege to say what he wishes."

"Must we listen to garbage and filth?" called Semon Voidenvo. "This man has destroyed Tranque Float; now he urges his

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frantic lunacy upon the rest of us."

"Let him urge," declared Phyral Berwick. "You are under no obligation to comply."

Sklar Hast said, "The Intercessors naturally resist these ideas; they are bound closely to King Kragen, and claim to have some means of communicating with him. Possibly this is so. Why else should King Kragen arrive so opportunely at Tranque Float? Now here is a very cogent point: if we can agree to liberate ourselves from King Kragen, we must prevent the Intercessors from making known our plans to him, otherwise we shall suffer more than necessary. Most of you know in your hearts that I speak truth. King Kragen is a crafty beast with an insatiable appetite and we are his slaves. You know this truth but you fear to acknowledge it. Those who spoke before me have mentioned our forefathers: the men who captured a ship from the tyrants who sought to immure them on a penal planet. What would our forefathers have done? Would they have submitted to this gluttonous ogre? Of course not.

"How can we kill King Kragen? The plans must wait upon agreement, upon the concerted will to act, and in any event must not be told before the Intercessors. If there are any here who believe as I do, now is the time for them to make themselves heard."

HE stepped down from the rostrum. Across the float was silence. Men's faces were frozen. Sklar Hast looked to right and to left. No one met his eye.

Semon Voidenvo mounted the rostrum. "You have listened to the shameless murderer. On Tranque Float we condemned him to death for his malevolent acts. According to custom he demanded the right to speak before a convocation; now he has done so. Has he confessed his great crime; has he wept for the evil he has visited upon Tranque Float? No; he gibbers his plans for further enormities; he outrages decency by mentioning our ancestors in the same breath with his foul proposals. Let the convocation endorse the verdict of Tranque Float; let all those who respect King Kragen and benefit from his ceaseless vigilance, raise now their hands in the clenched fist of death!"

"Death!" roared the Intercessors and raised their fists. But elsewhere through the crowd there was hesitation and uneasiness. Eyes shifted backwards and forwards; there were furtive glances out to sea. Semon Voidenvo once more called for a signal, and now a few fists were raised.

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Phyral Berwick, the Apprise Monitor, rose to his feet. "I remind Semon Voidenvo that he has now called twice for the death of Sklar Hast. If he calls once more and fails to achieve an affirmative vote Sklar Hast is vindicated."

Semon Voidenvo's face sagged. He looked uncertainly over the crowd, and without further statement descended.

The rostrum was empty. No one sought to speak. Finally Phyral Berwick himself mounted the steps. He was a stocky square-faced man with gray hair, ice-blue eyes, a short gray beard. He spoke slowly. "You have heard Sklar Hast, who calls for the death of King Kragen. You have heard Semon Voidenvo, who calls for the death of Sklar Hast. I will tell you my feelings. I have great fear in the first case and great disinclination in the second. I have no clear sense of what I should do."

From the audience a man called "Question!" Phyral Berwick nodded. "State your name, caste and craft, and propound your question."

"I am Meth Cagno; I am by blood a Larcener, although I no longer follow caste custom; my craft is that of Scrivener. My question has this background: Sklar Hast has voiced a conjecture which I think deserves an answer: namely, that Semon Voidenvo, the Tranque Intercessor, called King Kragen to Tranque Float. This is a subtle question, because much depends upon not only *if* Semon Voidenvo issued the call, but precisely *when*. If he did so when the rogue kragen was first discovered, well and good. But—if he called after Sklar Hast made his attempt to kill the rogue, Semon Voidenvo is more guilty of the Tranque disaster than Sklar Hast. My question then: what is the true state of affairs? Do the Intercessors secretly communicate with King Kragen? Specifically, did Semon Voidenvo call King Kragen to Tranque Float in order that Sklar Hast should be punished?"

Phyral Berwick deliverated. "I cannot answer your question. But I think it deserves an answer. Semon Voidenvo, what do you say?"

"I say nothing."

"Come," said Phyral Berwick reasonably. "Your craft is Intercessor; your responsibility is to the men whom you represent, not to King Kragen, no matter how fervent your respect. Any evasion or secrecy can only arouse our misgivings."

"It is to be understood," said Semon Voidenvo tartly, "that if I did indeed summon King Kragen, my motives were of the highest order."

"Well, then, did you do so?"

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SEMON VOIDENVO cast about for a means to escape from his dilemma, and found none. Finally he said, "There is a means by which the Intercessors are able to summon King Kragen in the event that a rogue kragen appears. This occurred; I so summoned King Kragen."

"Indeed." Phyral Berwick drummed his fingers on the rail of the rostrum. "Are these the only occasions that you summon King Kragen?"

"Why do you question me?" demanded Semon Voidenvo. "I am Intercessor; the criminal is Sklar Hast."

"Easy, then; the questions illuminate the extent of the alleged crime. For instance, let me ask this: do you ever summon King Kragen to feed from your lagoon in order to visit a punishment upon the folk of your float?"

Semon Voidenvo blinked. "The wisdom of King Kragen is inordinate. He can detect delinquencies, he makes his presence known—"

"Specifically then, you summoned King Kragen to Tranque Float when Sklar Hast sought to kill the lesser kragen?"

"My acts are not in the balance. I see no reason to answer the question."

Phyral Berwick spoke to the crowd in a troubled voice. "There seems no way to determine exactly when Semon Voidenvo called King Kragen. If he did so after Sklar Hast had begun his attack upon the rogue, then in my opinion, Semon Voidenvo the Intercessor is more immediately responsible for the Tranque disaster than Sklar Hast. Thereupon it becomes a travesty to visit any sort of penalty upon Sklar Hast. Unfortunately there seems no way of settling this question."

The Apprise Intercessor, Barquan Blasdel, rose slowly to his feet. "Arbiter Berwick, I fear that you are seriously confused. Sklar Hast and his gang committed an act knowingly proscribed both by the Tranque Monitor Ixon Myrex and by the Tranque Intercessor Semon Voidenvo. The consequences stemmed from this act; hence Sklar Hast is guilty."

"Barquan Blasdel," said Phyral Berwich, "you are Apprise Intercessor. Have you ever summoned King Kragen to Apprise Float?"

"As Semon Voidenvo pointed out, Sklar Hast is the criminal at the bar, not the conscientious intercessors of the various floats. By no means may Sklar Hast be allowed to evade his punishment. King Kragen is not lightly to be defied. Even though the convocation will not raise their collective fist to smite Sklar Hast, I say that he must die."

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Phyral Berwick fixed his pale blue eyes upon Barquan Blasdel. "If the convocation gives Sklar Hast his life, he will not die unless I die before him."

Meth Cagno came forward. "And I likewise."

The men of Tranque Float who had joined Sklar Hast in the killing of the rogue kragen came toward the rostrum, shouting their intention of joining Sklar Hast either in life or death, and with them came others, from various floats.

Barquan Blasdel climbed onto the rostrum, held his hands wide. "Before others declare themselves—look out to sea. King Kragen watches, attentive to learn who is loyal and who is faithless."

THE crowd swung about as if one individual. A hundred yards off the float the water swirled lazily around King Kragen's great turret. The crystal eyes pointed like telescopes toward Apprise Float. Presently the turret sank beneath the surface. The blue water roiled, then flowed smooth and featureless.

Sklar Hast went to the ladder, started to mount to the rostrum. Barquan Blasdelt the Intercessor halted him. "The rostrum must not become a shouting-place. Stay till you are summoned!" But Sklar Hast pushed him aside, went to face the crowd. He pointed toward the smooth ocean. "There you have seen the vile beast, our enemy! Why should we deceive ourselves? Intercessors, arbiters, all of us—let us forget our differences, let us join our crafts and our resources! If we do so, we can evolve a method to kill King Kragen! So now—decide!"

Barquan Blasdel threw back his head aghast. He took a step toward Sklar Hast, as if to seize him, then turned to the audience. "You have heard this madman—twice you have heard him. You have also observed the vigilance of King Kragen whose force is known to all. You can choose therefore either to obey the exhortations of a twitching lunatic, or be guided by your ancient trust in the benevolence of mighty King Kragen. In one manner only does Sklar Hast speak truth: there must be a definite resolution to this matter. We can have no half-measures! Sklar Hast must die! So now hold high your fists—each and all! Silence the frantic screamings of Sklar Hast! King Kragen is near at hand! Death to Sklar Hast!" He thrust his fist high into the air.

The Intercessors followed suit. "Death to Sklar Hast!"

Hesitantly, indecisively, other fists raised, then others and others. Some changed their minds and drew down their fists; oth-

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ers submitted to arguments and either drew down their fists or thrust them high; some raised their fists only to have others pull them down. Altercations sprang up across the float; the hoarse sound of contention began to make itself heard. Barquan Blasdel leaned forward in sudden concern, calling for calm. Sklar Hast likewise started to speak, but he desisted—because suddenly words were of no avail. In a bewildering, amost magical, shift the placid convocation had become a melée. Men and women tore savagely at each other, screaming, cursing, raging, squealing: Emotion accumulated from childhood, stored and constrained, had suddenly exploded; and the identical fear and hate had prompted opposite reactions. Across the float the tide of battle surged, out into the water where staid Bezzlers and responsible Larceners sought to drown each other. Few weapons were available: clubs of stalk, a bone axe or two, a half-dozen stakes, as many knives. While the struggle was at its most intense King Kragen once more surfaced, this time a quarter-mile to the north from whence he turned his vast incurious gaze upon the float.

THE fighting slowed and dwindled, from sheer exhaustion. The combatants drew apart into panting bleeding groups. In the lagoon floated half-a-dozen corpses; on the float lay as many more. Now for the first time it could be seen that those who stood by Sklar Hast were considerably outnumbered, by almost two to one, and also that this group included for the most part the most vigorous and able of the craftsmen, though few of the Masters: about half of the Hoodwinks, two-thirds of the Scriveners, relatively few from the Jacklegs. Advertisermen, Nigglers and other low castes, fewer still of the Arbiters and no Intercessors whatever.

Barquan Blasdel, still on the rostrum, cried out, "This is a sorry day indeed; a sorry day! Sklar Hast, see the anguish you have brought to the floats! There can be no mercy for you now!"

Sklar Hast came forward, pale and flaming-eyed. Blood coursed down his face from the slash of knife. Ignoring Blasdel he mounted the rostrum, and addressed the two groups:

"As Blasdel the Intercessor has said, there is no turning back now. So be it. Let those who want to serve King Kragen remain. Let those who want free lives go forth across the sea. There are floats to north and south, to east and west, floats as kind and hospitable as these, where we will soon have homes as rich and modern—perhaps more so."

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Barquan Blasdel stroke forward. "Go then! All you faithless, you irreverent ones—get hence and good riddance! Go where you will, and never seek to return when the teeming kragen, unchided by the great King, devour your sponges, tear your nets, crush your coracles!"

"The many cannot be as rapacious as the one," said Sklar Hast. "You who will go then, return to your floats, load tools and cordage, all your utile goods into your coracles. In two days we depart. Our destination and other details must remain secret. I need not explain why." He cast an ironic look toward Barquan Blasdel.

"You need not fear our interference," said Blasdel. "You may depart at will; indeed we will facilitate your going."

"On the morning of the third day hence, then, when the wind blows fair, we depart."

Chapter III

BARQUAN BLASDEL the Apprise Intercessor, his spouse and six daughters, occupied a pad to the north of the main float, somewhat isolated and apart. It was perhaps the choicest and most pleasant pad of the Apprise complex, situated where Blasdel could read the hoodwink towers of Apprise, of Quatrefoil and the Bandings to the east, of Granolt to the west. The pad was delightfully overgrown with a hundred different plants and vines: some yielding resinous pods, others capsules of fragrant sap, others crisp tendrils and shoots. Certain shrubs produced stains and pigment; a purple-leaved epiphyte yielded a rich-flavored pith. Other growths were entirely ornamental—a situation not too usual along the floats, where space was at a premium and every growing object weighed for its utility. Along the entire line of floats few pads could compare to that of Barquan Blasdel for beauty, variety of plantings, isolation and calm.

In late afternoon of the second day after the turbulent convocation, Barquan Blasdel returned to his pad. He dropped the painter of his coracle over a stake of carved bone, gazed appreciatively into the west. The sun had only just departed the sky, which now glowed with effulgent greens, blues, and, at the zenith, a purple of exquisite purity. The ocean, shuddering to the first whispers of the evening breeze, reflected the sky. Blasdel felt surrounded, immersed in color . . . He turned away, marched to his house, whistling a complacent tune between his teeth. On the morrow the most troublesome elements of all the floats would depart on the morning breeze, and no more would be heard from

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them ever. And Blasdel's whistling became slow and thoughtful. Although life flowed smoothly and without contention, over the years a certain uneasiness and dissatisfaction had begun to make itself felt. Dissident elements had begun to question the established order. The sudden outbreak of violence at the convocation perhaps had been inevitable: an explosion of suppressed or even unconscious tensions. But all was working out for the best. The affair could not have resolved itself more smoothly if he had personally arranged the entire sequence of events. At one stroke all the skeptics, grumblers, ne'er-do-wells, the covertly insolent, the obstinate hard-heads—at one stroke, all would disappear, never again to trouble the easy and orthodox way of life.

Almost jauntily Barquan Blasdel ambled up the path to his residence: a group of five semi-detached huts, screened by the garden from the main float, and so providing a maximum of privacy for Blasdel, his spouse and his six daughters. Blasdel halted. On a bench beside the door sat a man. Twilight murk concealed his face. Blasdel frowned, peered. Intruders upon his private pad were not welcome. Blasdel marched forward. The man rose from the bench and bowed: it was Phyral Berwick, the Apprise Arbiter. "Good evening," said Berwick. "I trust I did not startle you."

"By no means," said Blasdel shortly. With rank equal to his own Berwick could not be ignored, although after his unconventional actions at the convocation Blasdel could not bring himself to display more than a minimum of formal courtesy. He said, "Unfortunately I was not expecting callers, and can offer you no refreshment."

"A circumstance of no moment," declared Berwick. "I desire neither food nor drink." He waved his hand around the pad. "You live on a pad of surpassing beauty, Barquan Blasdel. There are many who might envy you."

Blasdel shrugged. "Since my conduct is orthodox, I am armored against adverse opinion. But what urgency brings you here? I fear that I must be less than ceremonious; I am shortly due at the hoodwink tower to participate in a coded all-float conference."

BERWICK made a gesture of polite acquiescence. "My business is of small moment. But I would not keep you standing out here in the dusk. Shall we enter?"

Blasdel grunted, opened the door, allowed Berwick to enter. From a cupboard he brought luminant fiber, which he set aglow and arranged in a holder. Turning a quick side-glance toward

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Berwick he said, "In all candor I am somewhat surprised to see you. Apparently you were among the most vehement of those dissidents who planned to depart."

"I may well have given that impression," Berwick agreed. "But you must realize that declarations uttered in the heat of emotion are occasionally amended in the light of sober reason."

Blasdel nodded curtly. "True enough. I suspect that many of the ingrates will think twice before joining this hare-brained expedition."

"This is partly the reason for my presence here," said Berwick. He looked around the room. "An interesting chamber. You own dozens of valuable artifacts. But where are the others of your family?"

"In the domestic area. This is my sanctum, my workroom, my place of meditation."

"Indeed." Berwick inspected the walls. "Indeed, indeed! I believe I notice certain relicts of the forefathers!"

"True," said Blasdel. "This small flat object is of the substance called 'metal', and is extremely hard. The best bone knife will not scratch it. The purpose of this particular object I cannot conjecture. It is an heirloom. These books are exact copies of the Dicta in the Hall of Archives, and present the memoirs of the Forefathers. Alas! I find them beyond my comprehension. There is nothing more of any great interest. On the shelf—my ceremonial head-dresses; you have seen them before. Here is my telescope. It is old; the case is warped, the gum of the lenses has bulged and cracked. It was poor gum, to begin with. But I have little need for a better instrument. My possessions are few. Unlike many Intercessors and certain Arbiters," here he cast a meaningful eye at Phyral Berwick, "I do not choose to surround myself with sybaritical cushions and baskets of sweetmeats."

Berwick laughed ruefully. "You have touched upon my weaknesses. Perhaps the fear of deprivation has occasioned second-thoughts in me."

"Ha hah!" Blasdel became jovial. "I begin to understand. The scalawags who set off to wild new floats can expect nothing but hardship: wild fish, horny sponges, new varnish with little more body than water; in short they will be returning to the life of savages. They must expect to suffer the depredations of lesser kragen, who will swiftly gather. Perhaps in time . . ." His voice dwindled, his face took on a thoughtful look.

"What was it you were about to say?" prompted Phyral Berwick.

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BLASDEL gave a non-committal laugh. "An amusing, if far-fetched, conceit crossed my mind. Perhaps in time one of these lesser kragen will vanquich the others, and drive them away. When this occurs, those who flee King Kragen will have a king of their own, who may eventually . . ." Again his voice paused.

"Who may eventually rival King Kragen in size and force? Berwick supplied. "The concept is not unreasonable—although King Kragen is already enormous from long feasting, and shows no signs of halting his growth." An almost imperceptible tremor moved the floor of the hut. Blasdel went to look out the door. "I thought I felt the arrival of a coracle."

"Conceivably a gust of wind," said Berwick. "Well, to my errand. As you have guessed I did not come to examine your relicts or comment upon the comfort of your cottage. My business is this. I feel a certain sympathy for those who are leaving, and I feel that no one, not even the most violently fanatic Intercessor, would wish this group to meet King Kragen upon the ocean. King Kragen, as you are aware, disapproves of exploration, and becomes petulant, even wrathful, when he finds men venturing out upon the ocean. Perhaps he fears the possibility of the second King Kragen concerning which we speculated. Hence I came to inquire the whereabouts of King Kragen. In the morning the wind blows east, and the optimum location for King Kragen would be to the far west at Tranque or Thrasneck."

Blasdel nodded sagely. "The emigrants are putting their luck to the test. Should King Kragen chance to be waiting in the east tomorrow morning, and should he spy the flotilla, his wrath might well be excited, to the detriment of the expedition."

"And where," inquired Berwick, "was King Kragen at last notification?"

Barquan Blasdel knit his brows. "I believe I noted a hoodwink message to the effect that he was seen cruising in a westerly direction to the south of Maudelinda Float, toward Bickle. I might well have misread the flicker, I only noted the configuration from the corner of my eye —but such was my understanding."

"Excellent," declared Berwick. "This is good news. The emigrants should make their departure safely and without interference."

"So we hope," said Blasdel. "King Kragen of course is subject to unpredictable whims and quirks."

Berwick made a confidential sign. "Sometimes—so it is rumored—he responds to signals

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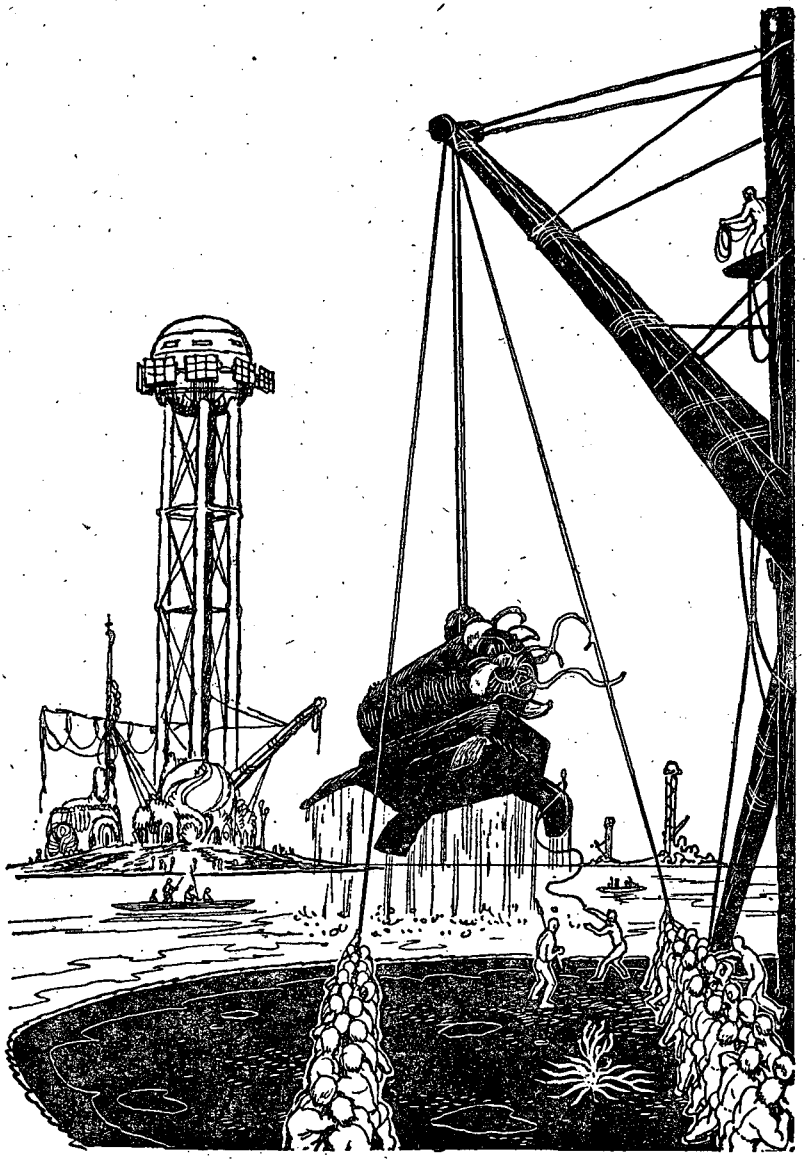

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transmitted in some mysterious manner by the Intercessors. Tell me, Barquan Blasdel, is this the case? We are both notables and together share responsibility for the welfare of Apprise Float. Is it true then that the Intercessors communicate with King Kragen, as has been alleged?"

"Now then, Arbiter Berwick," said Blasdel, "this is hardly a pertinent question. Should I answer yes, then I wold be divulging a craft secret. Should I answer no, then it would seem that we Intercessors boast of non-existent capabilities. So you must satisfy yourself with those hypotheses which seem the most profitable."

"Fairly answered," said Phyral Berwick. "However—and in the strictest confidence—I will report to you an amusing circumstance. As you know, at the convocation I declared myself for the party of Sklar Hast. Subsequently I was accepted into their most intimate counsels. I can inform you with authority—but first, you will assure me of your silence? As under no circumstances would I betray Slar Hast or compromise the expedition."

"Certainly, indeed; my lips are sealed as with fourteen-year old varnish."

"Well then, I accept you at your word. This is Sklar Hast's amusing tactic: he has arranged that a group of influential Intercessors shall accompany the group. If all goes well, the Intercessors live. If not, like all the rest, they are crushed in the mandibles of King Kragen." And Phyral Berwick, standing back, watched Barquan Blasdel with an attentive gaze. "What do you make of that?"

BLASDEL stood rigid, fingering his fringe of black beard. He darted a quick glance toward Berwick. "Which Intercessors are to be kidnaped?"

"Aha," said Berwick. "That, like the response of the question I put to you, is in the nature of a craft secret. I doubt if lesser men will be troubled, but if I were Intercessor for Aumerge, or Sumber, or Quatrefoil, or even Apprise, I believe that I might have cause for caution."

Blasdel stared at Berwick with mingled suspicion and uneasiness. "Do you take this means to warn me? If so, I would thank you to speak less ambiguously. Personally I fear no such attack. Within a hundred feet are three stalwarts, testing my daughters for marriage. A loud call would bring instant help from the float, which is scarcely a stone's throw beyond the garden."

Berwick nodded sagely. "It seems then that you are utterly secure."

"Still, I must hurry to the float," said Blasdel. "I am ex-

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pected at a conference, and the evening grows no younger."

Berwick bowed and stood aside. "You will naturally remember to reveal nothing of what I told you, to vouchsafe no oblique warning, to hint nothing of the matter—in fact to make no reference to it whatever."

Blasdel considered. "I will say nothing beyond my original intention, to the effect that the villain Sklar Hast obviously knows no moderation, and that it behooves all notables and craft masters to guard themselves against some form of final vengeance."

Berwick paused. "I hardly think you need go quite so far. Perhaps you could phrase it somewhat differently. In this wise: Sklar Hast and his sturdy band take their leave in the morning; now is the last chance for persons so inclined to cast in their lot with the group; however, you hope that all Intercessors will remain at their posts."

"Pah," cried Barquan Blasdel indignantly. "That conveys no sense of imminence. I will say, Sklar Hast is desperate; should he decide to take hostages, his diseased mind would select Intercessors as the most appropriate persons."

Berwick made a firm dissent. "This, I believe, transcends the line I have drawn. My honor is at stake and I can agree to no announcement which baldly states the certainty as a probability. If you choose to make a jocular reference, or perhaps urge that not too many Intercessors join the expedition, then all is well: a subtle germ of suspicion has been planted, you have done your duty and my honor has not been compromised."

"Yes, yes," cried Blasdel, "I agree to anything. But I must hurry to the hoodwink tower. While we quibble Sklar Hast and his bandits are kidnaping Intercessors."

"And what is the harm there?" inquired Berwick mildly. "You state that King Kragen has been observed from Maudelinda Float proceeding to the west; hence the Intercessors are in no danger, and presumably will be allowed to return once Sklar Hast is assured that King Kragen is no longer a danger. Conversely, if the Intercessors have betrayed Sklar Hast and given information to King Kragen so that he waits off Sciona Float, then they deserve to die with the rest. It is justice of the most precise and exquisite balance."

"That is the difficulty," muttered Blasdel, trying to push past Berwick to the door. "I cannot answer for the silence of the other Intercessors. Suppose one among them has notified King Kragen? Then a great tragedy ensues."

"Interesting! So you can in-

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deed summon King Kragen when you so desire?"

"Yes, yes, but, mind you, this is a secret. And now—"

"It follows then that you always know the whereabouts of King Kragen. How do you achieve this?"

"There is no time to explain; suffice it to say that a means is at hand."

"Right here? In your workroom?"

"Yes indeed. Now stand aside. After I have broadcast the warning I will make all clear. Stand aside then!"

BERWICK shrugged and allowed Blasdel to run from the cottage, through the garden to the edge of the pad.

Blasdel stopped short at the water's edge. The coracle had disappeared. Where previously Apprise Float had raised its foliage and its great hoodwink tower against the dusk, there was now only blank water and blank sky. The pad floated free; urged by the west wind of evening it already had left Apprise Float behind.

Blasdel gave an inarticulate cry of fury and woe. He turned to find Berwick standing behind him. "What has happened?"

"It seems that while we talked, divers cut through the stem of your pad. At least this is my presumption."

"Yes, yes," grated Blasdel. "So much is obvious. What else?"

Berwick shrugged. "It appears that willy-nilly, whether we like it or not, we are part of the great emigration. Now that such is the case I am relieved to know that you have a means to determine the whereabouts of King Kragen. Come. Let us make use of this device and reassure ourselves."

Blasdel made a guttural sound deep in his throat. He crouched and for a moment appeared on the point of hurling himself at Phyral Berwick. From the shadows of the verdure appeared another man. Berwick pointed. "I believe Sklar Hast himself is at hand."

"You tricked me," groaned Barquan Blasdel between clenched teeth. "You have performed an infamous act, which you shall regret."

"I have done no such deed, although it appears that you may well have misunderstood my position. Still, the time for recrimination is over. We share a similar problem, which is how to escape the malevolence of King Kragen. I suggest that you now proceed to locate him."

Without a word Blasdel turned, proceeded to his cottage. He entered the main room, with Berwick and Sklar Hast close behind. He crossed to the wall, lifted a panel to reveal an inner room. He brought more lights;

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all entered. A hole had been cut in the floor, and through the pad, the spongy tissue having been painted with a black varnish to prevent its growing together. A tube fashioned from fine yellow stalk perhaps four inches in diameter led down into the water. "At the bottom," said Blasdel curtly, "is a carefully devised horn, of exact shape and quality. The end is four feet in diameter and covered with a diaphragm of seasoned and varnished pad-skin. King Kragen emits a sound to which this horn is sensitive." He went to the tube, put down his ear, listened, slowly turned the tube around a vertical axis. He shook his head. "I hear nothing. This means that King Kragen is at least ten miles distant. If he is closer I can detect him. He passed to the east early today; presumably he swims somewhere near Sumber, or Adelvine."

Sklar Hast laughed quietly. "Urged there by the Intercessors?"

Blasdel shrugged sourly. "As to that I have nothing to say."

"How then do you summon King Kragen?"

Blasdel pointed to a rod rising from the floor, the top of which terminated in a crank. "In the water below is a drum. Inside this drum fits a wheel. When the crank is turned, the wheel, working in resin, rubs against the drum and emits a signal. King Kragen can sense this sound from a great distance—once again about ten miles. When he is needed, at say Bickle Float, the Intercessor at Aumerge calls him, until the horn reveals him to be four or five miles distant, whereupon the Intercessor at Paisley calls him a few miles, then the Maudelinda Intercessor, and so forth until he is within range of the Intercessor at Bickle Float."

Sklar Hast nodded. "I see. In this fashion Semon Voidenvo called King Kragen to Tranque. Whereupon King Kragen destroyed Tranque Float and killed forty-three persons."

"That is the case."

SKLAR HAST turned away. Phyral Berwick told Blasdel, "I believe that Semon Voidenvo is one of the Intercessors who are accompanying the emigration. His lot may not be a happy one."

"This is unreasonable," Barquan Blasdel declared heatedly. "He was as faithful to his convictions as Sklar Hast is to his own. After all, Voidenvo did not enjoy the devastation of Tranque Float. It is his home. Many of those killed were his friends. But he gives his faith and trust to King Kragen."

Sklar Hast swung around. "And you?"

Blasdel shook his head. "Not with such wholeheartedness."

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Sklar Hast looked toward Berwick. "What should we do with this apparatus? Destroy it? Or preserve it?"

Berwick considered. "We might on some occasion wish to listen for King Kragen. I doubt if we ever will desire to summon him."

Sklar Hast gave a sardonic jerk of the head. "Who knows? To his death perhaps." He turned to Blasdel. "What persons are aboard the pad in addition to us?"

"My spouse—in the cottage two roofs along. Three young daughters who weave ornaments for the Star-cursing Festival. Three older daughters are attempting to prove themselves to three stalwarts who test them for wives. All are unaware that their home floats out on the deep ocean. None wish to become emigrants to a strange line of floats."

Sklar Hast said, "No more were any of the rest of us—until we were forced to choose. I feel no pity for them, or for you. Undoubtedly there will be ample work for all hands. Indeed, we may formulate a new guild: the Kragen-killers. If rumor is accurate, they infest the ocean."

He left the room, went out into the night. Blasdel cast a wry look at Phyral Berwick, went to listen once more at the detecting horn. Then he likewise left the room. Berwick followed, and lowered the panel. Both joined Sklar Hast at the edge of the pad, where now several coracles were tied. A dozen men stood in the garden. Sklar Hast turned to Blasdel. "Summon your spouse, your daughters and those who test them. Explain the circumstances, and gather your belongings. The evening breeze will soon die and we cannot tow the pad."

Blasdel departed, accompanied by Berwick. Sklar Hast and the others entered the work-room, carried everything of value or utility to the coracles, including the small metal relict, the Books of Dicta, the listening horn and the summoning drum. Then all embarked in the coracles, and Barquan Blasdel's beautiful pad was left to drift solitary upon the ocean.

Chapter IV

MORNING came to the ocean and with it the breeze from the west. The floats could no longer be seen; the ocean was a blue mirror in all directions. Sklar Hast lowered Blasdel's horn into the water, listened. Nothing could be heard. Barquan Blasdel did the same and agreed that King Kragen was nowhere near.

There were perhaps six hundred coracles in the flotilla, each carrying from four to eight persons, with as much gear, house-

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hold equipment and tools as possible, together with sacks of food and water.

Late in the afternoon they noted a few medium-sized floats to the north, but made no attempt to land. King Kragen was yet too near at hand.

The late afternoon breeze arose. Rude sails were rigged and the oarsmen rested. At dusk Sklar Hast ordered all the coracles connected by lines to minimize the risk of separation. When the breeze died and seas reflected the dazzling stars, the sails were brought down and all slept.

The following day was like the first, and also the day after. On the morning of the fourth day a line of splendid floats appeared ahead, easily as large and as rich of foliage as those they had left. Sklar Hast would have preferred to sail on another week, but the folk among the coracles were fervent in their rejoicing, and he clearly would have encountered near-unanimous opposition. So the flotilla landed upon three closely adjoining floats, drove stakes into the pad surface, tethered the coracles.

Sklar Hast called an informal convocation. "In a year or two," he said, "we can live lives as comfortable as those we left behind us. But this is not enough. We left our homes because of King Kragen, who is now our deadly enemy. We shall never rest secure until we find a means to make ourselves supreme over all the kragen. To this purpose we must live different lives than we did in the old days—until King Kragen is killed. How to kill King Kragen? I wish I knew. He is a monster, impregnable to any weapon we now can use against him. So this must be our primary goal: weapons against King Kragen." Sklar Hast paused, looked around the somber group. "This is my personal feeling. I have no authority over any of you, beyond that of the immediate circumstances, which are transient. You have a right to discredit me, to think differently—in which case I will muster those who feel as I do, and sail on to still another float, where we can dedicate ourselves to the killing of King Kragen. If we are all agreed, that our souls are not our own until King Kragen is dead, then we must formalize this feeling. Authority must be given to some person or group of persons. Responsibilities must be delegated; work must be organized. As you see I envision a life different to the old. It will be harder in some respects, easier in others. First of all, we need not feed King Kragen . . ."

A COMMITTEE of seven members was chosen, to serve as a temporary governing body until the needs of the new commu-

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nity required a more elaborate system. As a matter of course Sklar Hast was named to the committee, as well as Phyral Berwick who became the first chairman, and also Meth Cagno the Scrivener. The captured Intercessors sat aside in a sullen group and took no part in the proceedings.

The committee met for an hour, and as its first measure, ordained a census, that each man's caste and craft might be noted.

After the meeting Meth Cagno took Sklar Hast aside. "When you captured Barquan Blasdel, you brought his books."

"True."

"I have been examining these books. They are a set of the Ancient Dicta."

"So I understand."

"This is a source of great satisfaction to me. No one except the Scrivener reads the Dicta nowadays, though everyone professes familiarity. As the generations proceed, the lives of our ancestors and the fantastic environment from which they came seem more like myth than reality."

"I suppose this is true enough. I am a hoodwink by trade and only know hoodwink configurations. The Dicta are written in ancient calligraph, which puzzles me."

"It is difficult to read, that I grant," said Cagno. "However, a patient examination of the Dicta can be profitable. Each volume represents the knowledge of one of our ancestors, to the extent that he was able to organize it. There is also a great deal of repetition and dullness; our ancestors, whatever their talents, had a few literary skills. Some are vainglorious and devote pages to self-encomium. Others are anxious to explain in voluminous detail the vicissitudes which led to their presence on the Ship of Space. They seem to have been a very mixed group, from various levels of society. There are hints here and there which I, for one, do not understand. Some describe the Home World as a place of maniacs. Others seem to have held respected places in this society until, as they explain it, the persons in authority turned on them and instituted a savage persecution, ending, as we know, in our ancestors seizing control of the Ship of Space and fleeing to this planet."

"It is all very confusing," said Sklar Hast, "and none of it seems to have much contemporary application. For instance, they do not tell us how they boiled varnish on the Home World, or how they propelled their coracles. Do creatures like the kragen infest the Home World? If so, how do the Home Folk deal with them? Do they kill them or feed them sponges? Our ancestors are silent on these points."

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Meth Cagno shrugged. "Evidently they were not overly concerned, or they would have dealt with these matters at length. But I agree that there is much they fail to make clear. As in our own case, the various castes seemed trained to explicit trades. Especially interesting are the memoirs of James Brunet. His caste, that of Counterfeiter, is now extinct among us. Most of his Dicta are rather conventional exhortations to virtue, but toward the middle of the book he says this." Here Cagno opened a book and read:

" 'To those who follow us, to our children and grandchildren, we can leave no tangible objects of value. We brought nothing to the world but ourselves and the wreckage of our lives. We will undoubtedly die here—a fate probably preferable to New Ossining, but by no means the destiny any of us had planned for ourselves. There is no way to escape. Of the entire group I alone have a technical education, most of which I have forgotten. And to what end could I turn it? This is a soft world. It consists of ocean and sea-weed. There is land nowhere. To escape—even if we had the craft to build a new ship, which we do not—we need metal and metal there is none. Even to broadcast a radio signal we need metal. None . . . No clay to make pottery, no silica for glass, no limestone for concrete, no ore from which to smelt metal. Presumably the ocean carries various salts, but how to extract the metal without electricity? There is iron in our blood: how to extract it? A strange helpless sensation to live on this world where the hardest substance is our own bone! We have, during our lives, taken so many things for granted, and now it seems that no one can evoke something from nothing . . . This is a problem on which I must think. An ingenious man can work wonders, and I, a successful counterfeiter—or, rather, almost successful—am certainly ingenious.' "

METH CAGNO paused in his reading. "This is the end of the chapter."

"He seems to be a man of no great force," mused Sklar Hast. "It is true that metal can be found nowhere." He took the bit of metal from his pocket which had once graced the work-room of Barquan Blasdel. "This is obdurate stuff indeed, and perhaps it is what we need to kill King Kragen."

Meth Cagno returned to the book. "He writes his next chapter after a lapse of months:

" 'I have considered the matter at length. But before I proceed I must provide as best I can a picture of the way the universe works, for it is clear that none of

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my colleagues are in any position to do so, excellent fellows though they are. Please do not suspect me of whimsey: our personalities and social worth undoubtedly vary with the context in which we live.' "

Here Cagno looked up. "I don't completely understand his meaning here. But I suppose that the matter is unimportant." He turned the pages. "He now goes into an elaborate set of theorizations regarding the nature of the world, which, I confess, I don't understand. There is small consistency to his beliefs. Either he knows nothing, or is confused, or the world essentially is inconsistent. He claims that all matter is composed of less than a hundred 'elements', joined together in 'compounds'. The elements are constructed of smaller entities: 'electrons', 'protons', 'neutrons', which are not necessarily matter, but forces, depending on your point of view. When electrons move the result is an electric current: a substance or condition—he is not clear here—of great energy and many capabilities. Too much electricity is fatal; in smaller quantities we use it to control our bodies. According to Brunet all sorts of remarkable things can be achieved with electricity."

"Let us provide ourselves an electric current then," said Sklar Hast. "This may become our weapon against the kragen."

"The matter is not so simple. In the first place the electricity must be channeled through metal wires."

"Here is metal," said Sklar Hast, tossing to Meth Cagno the bit of metal he had taken from Blasdel, "though it is hardly likely to be enough."

"The electricity must also be generated," said Cagno, "which on the Home Planet seems to be a complicated process, requiring a great deal of metal."

"Then how do we get metal?"

"On other planets there seems to be no problem. Ore is refined and shaped into a great variety of tools. Here we have no ore. In other cases, metals are extracted from the sea, once again using electricity."

"Hmph," said Sklar Hast. "To procure metal, one needs electricity. To obtain the electricity, metal is required. It seems a closed circle, into which we are unable to break."

Cagno made a dubious face. "It may well be. Brunet mentions various means to generate electricity. There is the 'voltaic cell'—in which two metals are immersed in acid, and he describes a means to generate the acid, using water, brine, and electricity. Then there is thermo-electricity, photo-electricity, chemical electricity, electricity produced by the Rous effect, electricity gener-

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ated by moving a wire near another wire in which electricity flows. He states that all living creatures produce small quantities of electricity."

"Electricity seems rather a difficult substance to obtain," mused Sklar Hast. "Are there no simple methods to secure metal?"

"Brunet mentions that blood contains a small quantity of iron. He suggests a method for extracting it, by using a high degree of heat. But he also points out that there is at hand no substance capable of serving as a receptacle under such extremes of heat. He states that on the Home World many plants concentrate metallic compounds, and suggests that certain of the sea-plants might do the same. But again either heat or electricity are needed to secure the pure metal."

Sklar Hast ruminated. "Our first and basic problem, as I see it, is self-protection. In short we need a weapon to kill King Kragen. It might be a device of metal—or it might be a larger and more savage kragen, if such exist . . ." He considered. "Perhaps you should make production of metal and electricity your goal, and let no other pursuits distract you. I am sure that the council will agree, and put at your disposal such helpers as you may need."

"I would gladly do my best."

"And I," said Sklar Hast, "I will reflect upon the kragen."

THREE days later the first kragen was seen, a beast of not inconsiderable size, perhaps twenty feet in length. It came cruising along the edge of the float, and observing the men, stopped short and for twenty minutes floated placidly, swirling water back and forth with its vanes. Then slowly it swung about and continued along the line of floats.

By this time a large quantity of stalk and withe had been cut, scraped and racked, as well as a heap of root-wisp, to cure during the rigging of a rope-walk. A week later the new rope was being woven into net.

Two large pads were cut from the side of the float, stripped of rib-trussing, upper and lower membrane, then set adrift. The space thus opened would become a lagoon. Over the severed stalks sleeves were fitted with one end above water; the sap presently exuding would be removed, boiled and aged for varnish and glue. Meanwhile arbors were constructed, seeded with sponge-floss, and lowered into the lagoon. When the withe had cured, hut-frames were constructed, pad membrane stretched over the mesh and daubed inside and out with varnish.

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In a month the community had achieved a rude measure of comfort. On four occasions kragen had passed by, and the fourth occurrence seemed to be a return visit of the first. On this fourth visit the kragen paused, inspected the lagoon with care. It tentatively nudged the net, backed away and presently floated off.

Sklar Hast watched the occurrence, went to inspect the new-cut stalk, which now was sufficiently cured. He laid out a pattern and work began. First a wide base was built near the mouth of the lagoon, with a substructure extending down to the main stem of the float. On this base was erected an A-frame derrick of glued withe, seventy feet tall, with integral braces, the entire structure whipped tightly with strong line and varnished. Another identical derrick was built to overhang the ocean. Before either of the derricks were completed a small kragen broke through the net to feast upon the yet unripe sponges. Sklar Hast laughed grimly at the incident. "At your next visit, you will not fare so well," he called to the beast. "May the sponges rot in your stomach!"

The kragen swam lazily off down the line of floats, unperturbed by the threat. It returned two days later. This time the derricks were guyed and in place, but not yet fitted with tackle. Again Sklar Hast reviled the beast, which this time ate with greater fastidiousness, plucking only those sponges which like popcorn had overgrown their husks. The men worked far into the night installing the strut which, when the derrick tilted out over the water, thrust high the topping-halyard to provide greater leverage.

ON the next day the kragen returned, and entered the lagoon with insulting assurance: a beast somewhat smaller than that which Sklar Hast had captured on Tranque Float, but nonetheless a creature of respectable size. Standing on the float a stalwart old swindler flung a noose around the creature's turret, and on the pad a line of fifty men marched away with a heavy rope. The astonished kragen was towed to the outward leaning derrick, swung up and in. The dangling vanes were lashed; it was lowered to the float. As soon as the bulk collapsed the watching folk, crying out in glee, shoved forward, almost dancing into the gnashing mandibles. "Back, fools!" roared Sklar Hast. "Do you want to be cut in half? Back!" He was largely ignored. A dozen chisels hacked at the horny hide; clubs battered at the eyes. "Back!" raged Sklar Hast. "Back! What do you achieve by antics such as this? Back!"

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Daunted, the vengeful folk moved aisde. Sklar Hast took chisel and mallet and as he had done on Tranque Float, cut at the membrane joining dome to turret. He was joined by four others; the channel was swiftly cut and a dozen hands ripped away the dome. Again, with pitiless outcry, the crowd surged forward. Sklar Hast's efforts to halt them were fruitless. The nerves and cords of the creature's ganglionic center were torn from the turret, while the kragen jerked and fluttered and made a buzzing sound with its mandibles. The turret was plucked clean of the wet-string fibers as well as other organs, and the kragen lay limp. Sklar Hast moved away in disgust. Another member of the Seven, Nicklas Rile, stepped forward: "Halt now—no more senseless hacking! If the kragen has bones harder than our own, we will want to preserve them for use. Who knows what use can be made of a kragen's cadaver? The hide is tough; the mandibles are harder than the deepest stalk. Let us proceed intelligently!"

Sklar Hast watched from a little distance as the crowd examined the dead beast. He had no further interest in the kragen. A planned experiment had been foiled almost as soon as the hate-driven mob had rushed forward. But there would be more kragen for his derricks; hopefully they could be noosed by the sea-derrick before they broke into the lagoon. In years to come, strong-boats or barges equipped with derricks might even go forth to hunt the kragen . . . He approached the kragen once again, peered into the empty turret, where now welled a viscous milky blue fluid. James Brunet, in his Dicta, had asserted that the metal iron was a constituent of human blood; conceivably other metals or metallic compounds might be discovered in the blood of a kragen. He found Meth Cagno, who had been watching from a dignified distance, and communicated his hypothesis. Cagno made no dissent. "It may well be the case. Our basic problem, however, remains as before: separating the metal from the dross."

"You have no idea how to proceed?"

Meth Cagno smiled slightly. "I have one or two ideas. In fact, tomorrow, at noon precisely, we will test one of these ideas."

THE following day, an hour before noon, Sklar Hast rowed to the isolated pad on which Meth Cagno had established his workshop. Cagno himself was hard at work on an intricate contrivance whose purpose Sklar Hast could not fathom. A rectangular frame of stalk rose ten feet in the air, supporting a six-foot hoop of woven withe in a plane parallel

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to the surface of the float. To the hoop was glued a rather large sheet of pad-skin, which had been scraped, rubbed and oiled until it was almost transparent. Below Meth Cagno was arranging a box containing ashes. As Sklar Hast watched, he mixed in a quantity of water and some gum, enough to make a gray dough, which he worked with his fingers and knuckles, to leave a saucer-shaped depression.

The sun neared the zenith; Cagno signaled two of his helpers. One climbed up the staging; the other passed up buckets of water. The first poured these upon the transparent membrane, which sagged under the weight.

Sklar Hast watched silently, giving no voice to his perplexity. The membrane, now brimming, seemed to bulge perilously. Meth Cagno, satisfied with his arrangements, joined Sklar Hast. "You are puzzled by this device; nevertheless it is very simple. You own a telescope?"

"I do. An adequately good instrument, though the gum is clouded."

"The purest and most highly refined gum discolors, and even with the most careful craftsmanship, lenses formed of gum yield distorted images, of poor magnification. On the Home World, according to Brunet, lenses are formed of a material called 'glass'."

The sun reached the zenith; Sklar Hast's attention was caught by a peculiar occurrence in the box of damp ash. A white-hot spot had appeared; the ash began to hiss and smoke. He drew near in wonderment. "Glass would seem to be a useful material," Meth Cagno was saying. "Brunet describes it as a mixture of substances occuring in ash together with a compound called 'silica' which is found in ash but also occurs in the husks of sea-ooze: 'plankton', so Brunet calls it. Here I have mixed ash and sea-ooze; I have constructed a water-lens to condense sunlight, I am tring to make glass . . ." He peered into the box, then lifted it a trifle, bringing the image of the sun to its sharpest focus. The ash glowed red, orange, yellow; suddenly it seemed to slump. With a rod Cagno pushed more ash into the center, until the wooden box gave off smoke, whereupon Cagno pulled it aside, and gazed anxiously at the molten matter in the center. "Something has happened; exactly what we will determine when the stuff is cool." He turned to his bench, brought forward another box, this half-full of powdered charcoal. In a center depression rested a cake of black-brown paste.

"And what do you have there?" asked Sklar Hast, already marveling at Cagno's ingenuity.

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"Dried blood. I and my men have drained ourselves pale. Brunet reveals that blood contains iron. Now I will try to burn away the various unstable fluids and oozes, to discover what remains. I hope to find unyielding iron." Cagno thrust the box under the lens. The dried blood smouldered and smoked, then burst into a reeking flame which gave off a nauseous odor. Cagno squinted up at the sun. "The lens burns well only when the sun is overhead, so our time is necessarily limited."

"Rather than water, transparent gum might be used, which then would harden, and the sun could be followed across the sky."

"Unfortunately no gum is so clear as water," said Cagno regretfully. "Candle-plant sap is yellow. Bindlebane seep holds a blue fog."

"What if the two were mixed, so that the blue defeated the yellow? And then the two might be filtered and boiled. Or perhaps water can be coagulated with tincture of bone."

Cagno assented. "Possibly feasible, both."

THEY turned to watch the blood, now a glowing sponge which tumbled into cinders and then, apparently consumed, vanished upon the surface of the blazing charcoal. Cagno snatched the crucible out from under the lens. "Your blood seems not overrich," Sklar Hast noted critically. "It might be wise to tap Barquan Blasdel and the other Intercessors; they appear a hearty lot."

Cagno clapped a cover upon the box. "We will know better when the charcoal goes black." He went to his bench, brought back another box. In powdered charcoal stood another tablet, this of black paste. "And what substance is this?" inquired Sklar Hast.

"This," said Meth Cagno, "is kragen blood, which we boiled last night. If man's blood carries iron, what will kragen blood yield? Now we discover." He thrust it under the lens. Like the human blood it began to smoulder and burn, discharging a smoke even more vile than before. Gradually the tablet flaked and tumbled to the surface of the charcoal; as before Cagno removed it and covered it with a lid. Going to his first box, he prodded among the cinders with a bit of sharp bone, scooped out a congealed puddle of fused material which he laid on the bench. "Glass. Beware. It is yet hot."

Sklar Hast, using two pieces of bone, lifted the object. "So this is glass. Hmm. It hardly seems suitable for use as a telescope lens. But it may well prove useful otherwise. It seems dense and hard —indeed, almost metallic."

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Cagno shook his head in deprecation. "I had hoped for greater transparency. There are probably numerous impurities in the ash and sea-ooze. Perhaps they can be removed by washing the ash or treating it with acid, or something of the sort."

"But to produce acid, electricity is necessary, or so you tell me."

"I merely quote Brunet."

"And electricity is impossible?"

Cagno pursed his lips. "That we will see. I have hopes. One might well think it impossible to generate electricity using only ash, wood, water and sea-stuff—but we shall see. Brunet offers a hint or two. But first, as to our iron . . ."

The yield was small: a nodule of pitted gray metal half the size of a pea. "That bit represents three flasks of blood." Cagno remarked glumly. "If we bled every vein on the float we might win sufficient iron for a small pot."

"This is not intrinsically an unreasonable proposal," said Sklar Hast. "We can all afford a flask of blood, or two, or even more during the course of months. To think—we have produced metal entirely on our own resources!"

Cagno wryly inspected the iron nodule. "There is no problem to burning the blood under the lens. If every day ten of the folk come to be bled, eventually we will sink the pad under the accumulated weight of iron." He removed the lid from the third box. "But observe here! We have misused our curses! The kragen is by no means a creature to be despised!"

On the charcoal rested a small puddle of reddish-golden metal: three times as large as the iron nodule. "I presume this metal to be copper, or one of its alloys." said Cagno. "Brunet describes copper as a dark red metal, very useful for the purpose of conducting electricity."

Sklar Hast lifted the copper from the coals, tossed it back and forth till it was cool. "Metal everywhere! Nicklas Rile has been hacking apart the kragen for its bones. He is discarding the internal organs, which are black as snuff-flower. Perhaps they should also be burned under the lens."

"Convey them here, I will burn them. And then, after we burn the kragen's liver, or whatever the organ, we might attempt to burn snuff-flowers as well."

The kragen's internal organs yielded further copper. The snuff-flowers produced only a powder of whitish-yellow ash which Meth Cagno conscientiously stored in a tube labeled: *ash of snuff-flower.*

FOUR days later the largest of the kragen seen so far reap-

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peared. It came swimming in from the west, paralleling the line of floats. A pair of swindlers, returning to the float with a catch of gray-fish, were the first to spy the great black cylinder surmounted by its four-eyed turret. They bent to their oars, shouting the news ahead. A well-rehearsed plan now went into effect. A team of four young swindlers ran to a light-weight coracle, shoved off, paddled out to intercept the kragen. Behind the coracle trailed two ropes, each controlled by a gang of men. The kragen, lunging easily through the water, approached, swimming fifty yards off the float. The coracle eased forward, with one named Bade Beach going forward to stand on the gunwhales. The kragen halted the motion of its vanes, to drift and eye the coracle and the derricks with flint-eyed suspicion.

The two swindlers yet at the oars eased the coracle closer. Bade Beach stood tensely, twitching a noose, while the fourth man controlled the lines to the float. The kragen, contemptuous of attack, issued a few nonplussed clicks of the mandibles, twitched the tips of its vanes, creating four whirlpools. The coracle eased closer, to within a hundred feet, eighty—sixty feet. Bade Beach bent forward. The kragen decided to punish the men for their provocative actions and thrust sharply forward. When it was but thirty feet distant, Bade Beach tossed a noose toward the turret—and missed. From the float came groans of disappointment, one of the gangs hastily jerked the coracle back. The kragen swerved, turned, made a second furious charge which brought it momentarily to within five feet of the coracle, whereupon Bade Beach dropped the noose over its turret. From the float came a cheer; both gangs hauled on their lines, one snatching the coracle back to safety, the other tightening the noose and pulling the kragen aside, almost as it touched the coracle.

Thrashing and jerking the kragen was dragged over to the sea-leaning derrick, and hoisted from the water in the same fashion as the first. This was a large beast: the derrick creaked, the float sagged; before the kragen heaved clear from the water sixty-five men were tugging on the end of the lift. The derrick tilted back, the kragen swung in over the float. The vanes were lashed, the beast lowered. Again the onlookers surged forward, laughing, shouting, but no longer exemplifying the fury with which they had attacked the first kragen.

At a distance a group of Intercessors watched with curled lips. They had not reconciled themselves to their new circum-

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stances, and conscious of their status as the lowest of castes worked as little as possible. Chisels and mallets were plied against the kragen turret; the dome was pried loose, the nerve-nodes destroyed. Fibre buckets were brought, the body fluids were scooped out and carried off to evaporation trays.

Sklar Hast had watched from the side. This had been a large beast—about the size of King Kragen when first he had approached the Old Floats, a hundred and fifty years previously. Since they had successfully dealt with this creature, they need have small fear of any other—except King Kragen. And Sklar Hast was forced to admit that the answer was not yet known. No derrick could hoist King Kragen from the water. No line could restrain the thrust of his vanes. No float could bear his weight. Compared to King Kragen, this dead hulk now being hacked apart was a pygmy . . . From behind came a rush of feet; a woman tugged at his elbow, gasping and gulping in the effort to catch her breath. Sklar Hast, scanning the float in startlement, could see nothing to occasion her distress. Finally she was able to blurt: "Barquan Blasdel has taken to the sea, Barquan Blasdel is gone!"

"What!" cried Sklar Hast.

The woman told her story. For various reasons, including squeamishness and pregnancy, she had absented herself from the killing of the kragen, and kept to her hut at the far side of the float. Seated at her loom she observed a man loading bags into a coracle, but preoccupied with her own concerns she paid him little heed, and presently arose to the preparation of the evening meal. As she kneaded the pulp from which the bread-stuff known as pangolay was baked, it came to her that the man's actions had been noticeably furtive. Why had he not participated in the killing of the kragen? The man she had seen was Barquan Blasdel! The implications of the situation stunned her for a moment. Wiping her hands, she went to the hut where Blasdel and his spouse were quartered, to find no one at home. It was still possible that she was mistaken; Blasdel might even now be watching the killing of the kragen. So she hurried across the float to investigate. But on the way the conviction hardened: the man indeed had been Barquan Blasdel, and she had sought out Sklar Hast with the information.

FROM the first Barquan Blasdel had made no pretense of satisfaction with his altered circumstances. His former rank counted nothing, in fact aroused antagonism among his float-fel-

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lows. Barquan Blasdel grudgingly adapted himself to his new life, building sponge arbors and scraping withe. His spouse, who on Apprise Float had commanded a corps of four maidens and three garden-men, at first rebelled when Blasdel required her to bake pangolay and core sponges "like any low-caste slut", as she put it, but finally she surrendered to the protests of her empty stomach. Her daughters adopted themselves with better grace, and indeed the four youngest participated with great glee at the slaughter of the kragen. The remaining two stayed in the background, eyebrows raised disdainfully at the vulgar fervor of their sisters.

Barquan Blasdel, his spouse, his two older daughters and their lovers were missing, as was a sturdy six-man coracle together with considerable stores. Sklar Hast despatched four coracles in pursuit, but evening had brought the west wind, and there was no way of determining whether Blasdel had paddled directly east, or had taken refuge in the jungle of floats at the eastern edge of the chain, where he could hide indefinitely.

The coracles returned to report no sign of the fugitives. The Council of Seven gathered to consider the situation. "Our mistake was leniency," complained Robin Magram, a gnarled and weather-beaten old Swindler. "These Intercessors—Barquan Blasdel and all the rest—are our enemies. We should have made a complete job of it, and strangled them. Our qualms have cost us our security."

"Perhaps," said Sklar Hast. "But I for one cannot bring myself to commit murder—even if such murder is in our best interest."

"These other Intercessors now —" Magram jerked his thumb to a group of huts near the central pinion "—what of them? Each wishes us evil. Each is now planning the same despicable act as that undertaken by Barquan Blasdel and his spouse. I feel that they should be killed at once—quietly, without malice, but with finality."

His proposal met no great enthusiasm. Arrel Sincere, a Bezzler of complete conviction and perhaps the most caste-conscious man on the float, said glumly, "What good do we achieve? If Barquan Blasdel returns to the Old Floats, our refuge is known and we must expect inimical actions."

"Not necessarily," contended Meth Cagno. "The folk of the Old Floats gain nothing by attacking us."

Sklar Hast made a pessimistic dissent. "We have escaped King Kragen, we acknowledge no overlord. Misery brings jealousy and

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resentment. The Intercessors can whip them to a sullen fury." He pitched his voice in a nasal falsetto. "'Those insolent fugitives! How dare they scamp their responsibility to noble King Kragen? How dare they perform such bestial outrages against the lesser kragen? Everyone aboard the coracles! We go to punish the iconoclasts!"

"Possibly correct," said Meth Cagno. "But the Intercessors are by no means the most influential folk of the Floats. The Arbiters will hardly agree to any such schemes."

"In essence," said Phyral Berwick, "we have no information. We speculate in a void. In fact Barquan Blasdel may lose himself on the ocean and never return to the Old Floats. He may be greeted with apathy or with excitement. We talk without knowledge. It seems to me that we should take steps to inform ourselves as to the true state of affairs: in short, that we send spies to derive this information for us."

PHYRAL BERWICK'S proposal ultimately became the decision of the Seven. They also ordained that the remaining Intercessors be guarded more carefully, until it was definitely learned whether or not Barquan Blasdel had returned to the Old Floats. If such were the case the location of the New Floats was no longer a secret, and the consensus was that the remaining Intercessors should likewise be allowed to return, should they choose to do so. Nicklas Rile considered the decision soft-headed. "Do you think they would warrant us like treatment in a similar situation? Remember, they planned that King Kragen should waylay us!"

"True enough," said Arrel Sincere wearily, "but what of that? We can either kill them, hold them under guard, or let them go their ways, the last option being the least taxing and the most honorable."

Nicklas Rile made no further protest, and the council then concerned itself with the details of the projected spy operation. None of the coracles at hand were considered suitable, and it was decided to build a coracle of special design—long, light, low to the water, with two sails of fine weave to catch every whisper of wind. Three men were named to the operation, all originally of Almack Float, a small community far to the east, in fact next to Sconia, the end of the chain. None of the three men had acquaintance on Apprise and so stood minimal chances of being recognized.

The coracle was built at once. A light keel of laminated and glued withe was shaped around

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pegs; ribs were bent and lashed into place; diagonal ribs were attached to these, then the whole frame was covered with four layers of varnished pad-skin.

At mid-morning of the fourth day after Barquan Blasdel's flight, the coracle, which was almost a canoe, departed to the east, riding easily and swiftly over the sunny blue water. For three hours it slid along the line of floats, each an islet bedecked in blue, green and purple verdure, surmounted by the arching fronds of prime plant, each surrounded by its constellation of smaller pads. The coracle reached the final float of the group and struck out east across the water. Water swirled and sparkled behind the long oars; the men in their short-sleeved white smocks working easily. Afternoon waned; the rain clouds formed and came scudding with black brooms hanging below. After the rain came sunset, making a glorious display among the broken clouds. The breeze began to blow from the west; the three men crouched and rowed with only sufficient force to maintain headway. Then came the mauve dusk with the constellations appearing and then night with the stars blazing down on the glossy black water. The men took turns sleeping, and the night passed. Before dawn the favoring wind rose; the sails were set, the coracle bubbled ahead, with a chuckling of bow-wave and wake. The second day was like the first. Just before dawn of the third day the men lowered the horn into the water and listened.

Silence.

THE men stood erect, looked into the west. Allowing for the increased speed of their passage, Tranque Float should be near at hand. But nothing could be seen but the blank horizons.

The dawn wind came; the sails were set, the coracle surged west. At noon the men, increasingly dubious, ceased paddling, and once more searched the horizons carefully. As before there was nothing visible save the line dividing dark blue from bright blue. The floats by now should be well within sight. Had they veered too far north or too far south?

The men deliberated, and decided that while their own course had generally been true west, the original direction of flight might have been something south of east: hence the floats in all probability lay behind the northern horizon. They agreed to paddle four hours to the north, then if nothing were seen, to return to the south.

Toward the waning of afternoon, with the rain-clouds piling up, far smudges showed themselves. Now they halted, lowered

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the horn, to hear *crunch crunch crunch*, with startling loudness. The men twisted the tube, to detect the direction of the sound. It issued from the north. Crouching low they listened, ready to paddle hastily away if the sound grew louder. But it seemed to lessen and the direction veered to the east. Presently it died to near inaudibility, and the men proceeded.

The floats took on substance, extending both east and west; soon the characteristic profiles could be discerned, and then the hoodwink towers. Dead ahead was Aumerge, with Apprise Float yet to the west.

So they paddled up the chain, the floats with familiar and beloved names drifting past, floats where their ancestors had lived and died: Aumerge, Quincunx, Fay, Hastings, Quatrefoil, with its curious cloverleaf configuration, and then the little outer group, the Bandings, and beyond, after a gap of a mile, Apprise Float.

The sun set, the hoodwink towers began to flicker, but the configurations could not be read. The men paddled the coracle toward Apprise. Verdure bulked up into the sky; the sounds and odors of the Old Floats wafted across the water, inflicting nostalgic pangs upon each of the men. They landed in a secluded little cove which had been described to them by Phyral Berwick, covered the coracle with leaves and rubbish. According to the plan, two remained by the coracle, while the third, one Henry Bastaff, moved across the float toward the central common and Apprise Market.

HUNDREDS of people were abroad on this pleasant evening, but Henry Bastaff thought their mood to be weary and even a trifle grim. He went to the ancient Apprise Inn, which claimed to be the oldest building of the floats: a long shed beamed with twisted oldstalks, reputedly cut at the astounding depth of three hundred feet. Within was a long bar of laminated strips, golden-brown with wax and use; shelves behind displayed jars and tubes of arrack, beer, and spirits of life, while buffets to each end offered various delicacies and sweetmeats. To the front wide eaves thatched with garwort frond and lit by yellow and red lanterns protected several dozen tables and benches where travelers rested and lovers kept rendezvous. Henry Bastaff seated himself where he could watch both the Apprise hoodwink tower and that of Quatrefoil to the east. The serving maid approached; he ordered beer and nut-wafers. As he drank and ate he listened to conversations at nearby tables and read the mes-

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sages which flickered up and down the line of floats.

The conversations were uninformative; the hoodwink messages were the usual compendium of announcements, messages, banter. Then suddenly in mid-message came a blaze, all eighteen lights together, to signal news of great importance. Henry Bastaff sat up straight on the bench.

"Important . . . information! This . . . afternoon . . . Apprise . . . Intercessor . . . Barquan Blasdel . . . kidnaped . . . by . . . the . . . rebels . . . returned . . . to . . . the . . . Floats . . . with . . . his . . . spouse . . . and . . . several . . . dependents. They . . . have . . . a . . . harrowing . . . tale . . . to . . . tell. The . . . rebels . . . are . . . established . . . on . . . a . . . float . . . to . . . the . . . east . . . where . . . they . . . kill . . . kragen . . . with . . . merciless . . . glee . . . and . . . plan . . . a . . . war . . . of . . . extermination . . . upon . . . the . . . folk . . . of . . . the . . . old . . . floats. Barquan Blasdel . . . escaped . . . and . . . after . . . an . . . unnerving . . . voyage . . . across . . . the . . . uncharted . . . ocean . . . late today . . . landed . . . on . . . Green Lamp Float. He . . . has . . . called . . . for . . . an . . . immediate . . . convocation . . . to . . . consider . . . what . . . measures . . . to . . . take . . . against . . . the . . . rebels . . . who . . . daily . . . wax . . . in . . . arrogance."

Chapter V

FOUR days later Henry Bastaff reported to the Seven. "Our arrival was precarious, for our initial direction took us many miles to the south of the Old Floats. Nevertheless we arrived. Apparently Blasdel experienced even worse difficulties for he reached Green Lamp Float about the same time that we landed on Apprise. I sat at the Old Tavern when the news came, and I saw great excitement. The people seemed more curious than vindictive, even somewhat wistful. A convocation was called for the following day. Since the folk of Almack Float would attend, I thought it best that Maible and Barway remain hidden. I stained my face, shaved eyebrows, mustache and hair, and at the convocation looked eye to eye with my Uncle Fodor the withe-peeler, who never gave a second glance.

"The convocation was vehement and lengthy. Barquan Blasdel resumed his rank of Apprise Intercessor. In my opinion Vrink Smathe, who had succeeded to the post, found no joy in Blasdel's return.

"With great earnestness Blasdel called for a punitive expedition. He spoke of those who had departed as 'iconoclasts', 'monsters', 'vicious scum of the world, which it was the duty of all decent folk to expunge'.

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"He aroused only lukewarm attention. No one showed heart for the project. The new Intercessors in particular were less than enthusiastic. Blasdel accused them of coveting their new posts, which they would lose if the old Intercessors returned. The new Intercessors refuted the argument with great dignity. 'Our concern is solely for the lives of men,' they said. 'What avail is there in destroying these folk? They are gone; good riddance. We shall maintain our ancient ways with more dedication because the dissidents have departed.'

"One of the new Intercessors had a crafty thought: 'Of course, if by some means we can direct King Kragen's attention to these fugitives, that is a different story.'

"Barquan Blasdel was forced to be content with this much. 'How can we do this?'

" 'By our usual means for summoning King Kragen: how else?'

"Blasdel agreed. 'It is necessary to hurry. These evil folk kill kragen and smelt metal from the blood. They plan mischief against us, and we must rebuff them with decisive severity.'

"There was further discussion, but no clear resolutions, which exasperated Barquan Blasdel. The convocation dissolved; we caught the evening wind to the east."

THE Seven considered Henry Bastaff's report. "At least we are in no immediate peril," ruminated Robin Magram. "It appears that our surest guarantee of security is our custody of the old Intercessors, who would supersede the new officials if rescued. So here is a powerful deterrent against any large-scale attack."

"Still, we always must fear discovery by King Kragen," stated Sklar Hast. "King Kragen is our basic enemy; it is King Kragen whom we must destroy."

After a minute's silence Arrel Sincere said, "That, at the moment, is in the nature of a remote day-dream. In the meantime we must prepare for various contingencies, including demolishment by King Kragen of our new facilities. Also we must maintain a continued source of information: in short, spies must presently return to the Old Floats."

Henry Bastaff looked uncomfortably at his mates. "I will volunteer, for at least one more trip. Much effort and delay could be avoided if it were possible to sail with more assurance of reaching the destination."

Meth Cagno said, "Brunet mentions the 'compass'—an iron needle which points always to the north. The iron is 'magnetized' by wrapping it in a coil of copper strands and passing an electric current through these

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strands. We have copper, we have iron."

"But no electricity."

"No electricity," agreed Meth Cagno.

"And no means of obtaining electricity."

"As to that—we shall see."

FOUR days later Meth Cagno summoned the Seven to his workshop. "You will now see electricity produced."

"What? In that device?" Sklar Hast inspected the clumsy apparatus. To one side a tube of hollow stalk five inches in diameter and twenty feet high was supported by a scaffold. The base was contained at one end of a long box holding what appeared to be wet ashes. The far end of the box was closed by a slab of compressed carbon, into which were threaded copper wires. At the opposite end, between the tube and wet ashes was another slab of compressed carbon.

"This is admittedly a crude device, unwieldy to operate and of no great efficiency," said Meth Cagno. "It does however meet our peculiar requirements: which is to say, it produces electricity without metal, through the agency of water pressure. Brunet describes it in his Dicta. He calls it the 'Rous machine'. The tube is filled with water, which is thereby forced through the mud, which is a mixture of ashes and sea-slime. The water carries an electric charge which it communicates to the porous carbon as it seeps through. By this means a small but steady and quite dependable source of electricity is at our hand. As you may have guessed, I have already tested the device, and so can speak with confidence." He turned, snapped his fingers, and his helpers mounted the scaffold carrying buckets of water which they poured into the tube. Meth Cagno connected the wires to a coil of several dozen revolutions. He brought forward a dish. On a cork rested a small rod of iron.

"I have already magnetized this iron," said Cagno. "Note how it points to the north? Now —I bring it near the end of the coil. See it jerk! Electricity is flowing in the wire!"

The other members of the Seven were impressed. "And this iron needle will now serve to guide Henry Bastaff?"

"So I believe. But the Rous machine provides an even more dramatic possibility. With electricity we can disassociate sea-water to produce, after certain operations, the acid of salt, and a caustic of countering properties as well. The acid can then be used to produce more highly concentrated streams of electricity—if we are able to secure more metal. There is iron in our blood: I ask myself, where does the iron origi-

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nate? Which of our foods contains the iron? I plan to reduce each of our foods under the lens, as well as any other distinctive substance which might yield a concentration of metal." He turned, went to the table, returned with a glistening object. "Look. A bottle of glass. Bolin Hyse has produced this bottle. He fashioned a tube of copper, fixed it to a longer tube of withe, dipped the copper into molten glass and blew. The result—" Meth Cagno inspected the object critically. "—is not beautiful. The glass is gray and streaked with ash. The shape is uncertain. Nevertheless—here is a glass bottle, produced from ash and sea-ooze. Eventually, we will be building devices of great intricacy."

"Subject to the indulgence of King Kragen," muttered Sklar Hast.

Meth Cagno threw up his hands. "King Kragen bah! We shall kill him. When next a kragen is brought to the derrick, allow me to deal with it. There are tests I wish to make."

Chapter VI

ON the world which had no name, there were no seasons, no variations of climate except those to be found by traversing the latitudes. Along the equatorial doldrums, where floats of sea-plant grew in chains and clots, each day was like every other, and the passage of a year could be detected only by watching the night sky. Though the folk had small need for accurate temporal distinctions, each day was numbered and each year named for some significant event. A duration of twenty-two years was a "surge", and was also reckoned by number. Hence a given date might be known as the 349th day in the Year of Malvinon's Deep Dive during the Tenth Surge. Time-reckoning was almost exclusively the province of the Scriveners. To most of the folk life seemed as pellucid and effortless as the glassy blue sea at noon.

King Kragen's attack upon Tranque Float occurred toward the year's end, which thereupon became the Year of Tranque's Abasement, and it was generally assumed that the following year would be known as the Year of the Dissenters' Going.

As the days passed and the year approached its midpoint, Barquan Blasdel, Apprise Intercessor, instead of allowing the memory of his kidnaping to grow dim, revived it daily with never-flagging virulence. Each evening saw a memorandum from Barquan Blasdel flicker up and down the chain of floats: "Vigilance is necessary. The dissidents are led by seven men of evil energy. They flout the majesty of King Kra-

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gen; they despise the folk who maintain old traditions and most especially the Intercessors. They must be punished and taught humility. Think well on this matter. Ask yourself how may the dissidents most expeditiously be chastened?"

The other Intercessors, while politely attending Blasdel's urgencies, did little to give them effect. Blasdel daily became more hectic. At a Conclave of Notables his demands that the floats assemble an armada to invade the new floats and destroy the dissidents was vetoed by the Arbiters, Guild Masters and Caste Chiefs, on the grounds of utter infeasibility and pointlessness. "Let them be," growled Emacho Feroxibus, Chief of the Quatrefoil Bezzlers. "So long as they do not molest us, why should we molest them? I for one don't care to risk drowning for so dismal a cause."

Barquan Blasdel, containing his temper, explained carefully, "The matter is more complex than this. Here is a group who have fled in order to avoid paying their due to King Kragen. If they are allowed to prosper, to make profit of their defection, then other folk may be tempted to wonder, why do we not do likewise? If the sin of kragen-killing becomes vulgar recreation, where is reverence? Where is continuity? Where is obedience to High Authority?"

"This may be true," stated Providence Dringle, Chief Hoodwink for the Populous Equity Float. "Nonetheless in my opinion the cure is worse than the complaint. And to risk a heretical opinion, I must say the benefits we derive from High Authority no longer seem commensurate with the price we pay."

Blasdel swung about in shock, as did the other Intercessors. "May I ask your meaning?" Blasdel inquired icily.

"I mean that King Kragen consumes six to seven bushels of choice sponges daily. He maintains his rule in the waters surrounding the floats, true, but what do we need fear from the lesser kragen? By your own testimony the dissidents have developed a method to kill the kragen with facility."

Blasdel said with frigid menace, "I can not overlook the fact that your remarks are identical to the preposterous ravings of the dissidents, who so rightly shall be obliterated."

"Do not rely on my help," said Providence Dringle.

"Nor mine," said Emacho Feroxibus.

THE conclave had divided into two antagonistic camps, the Intercessors and certain others supporting Barquan Blasdel, though few favored the more extreme of his propositions.

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From the foliage which surrounded the scene of the conclave came a crash and a muttered exclamation. A number of men sprang into the shrubbery. There was a confused scuffle, the sound of blows and exclamations, and presently a man was dragged out into the lamplight. His skin was dark, his face was bland and bare of hair.

Barquan Blasdel marched forward. "Who are you? Why do you lurk in these forbidden precincts?"

The man staggered and blinked foolishly. "Is this the tavern? Pour out the arrack, pour for all! I am a stranger on Apprise, I would know the quality of your food and drink."

Emacho Feroxibus snorted, "The fool is drunk, turn him off the float."

"No!" roared Blasdel, jerking forward in excitement. "This is a dissident, this is a spy! I know him well! He has shaved his head and his face, but never can he defeat my acuity! He is here to learn our secrets!"

The group turned their attention upon the man, who blinked even more vehemently. "A spy? Not I. I came to find the Old Tavern."

Blasdel sniffed the air in front of the captive's face. "There is no odor: neither beer nor arrack nor spirits of life. Come! All must satisfy themselves as to this so that there will be no subsequent contradictions and vacillations."

"What is your name?" demanded Vogel Womack, the Parnassus Arbiter. "Your float and your caste?"

The captive took a deep breath, cast off his pretense of drunkenness. "I am Henry Bastaff. I am a dissident. I am here to learn if you plan evil against us. That is my sole purpose."

"A spy!" cried Barquan Blasdel in a voice of horror. "A self-confessed spy!"

"It is a serious matter," said Emacho Feroxibus, "but the truth of the matter is undoubtedly as he has averred."

The Intercessors set up a chorus of indignant hoots and jibes. Barquan Blasdel said, "He is guilty of at least a double offense: first, the various illegalities entering into his dissidence; and second, his insolent attempt to conspire against us, the staunch and the faithful. The crime has occurred on Apprise Float, and affects our relations with King Kragen. Hence, I, Barquan Blasdel, am compelled to demand an extreme penalty. Parler Denk, the new Apprise Arbiger, in such instance, can implement such a penalty by simple executive command, without consultation with the council. Arbiter Denk, what is your response?"

"Be not hasty," warned Vogel Womack. "Tomorrow the man's

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deed will not appear so grave."

Barquan Blasdel ignored him. "Parler Denk, what is your response?"

"I agree, in all respects. The man is a vile dissident, an agent of turmoil and a spy. He must suffer an extreme penalty. To this declaration there will be allowed no appeal."

ON the following day a significant alteration was made in the method by which King Kragen was tendered his custmary oblation. Previously, when King Kragen approached a lagoon with the obvious intent of feasting, arbors overgrown with sponges were floated to the edge of the net, for King Kragen to pluck with his palps. Now the sponges were plucked, heaped upon a great tray and floated forth between a pair of coracles. When the tray was in place, Barquan Blasdel went to his sanctum. King Kragen was close at hand; the scraping of his chitin armor sounded loud in Blasdel's listening device. Blasdel sounded his submarine horn; the scraping ceased, then began once more, increasing in intensity. King Kragen was approaching.

He appeared from the east, turret and massive torso riding above the surface, the great rectangular swimming platform gliding through the ocean on easy strokes of his vanes.

The forward eyes noted the offering. King Kragen approached casually, inspected the tray, began to scoop the sponges into his maw with his forward palps.

From the float folk watched in somber speculation mingled with awe. Barquan Blasdel came gingerly forth to stand on the edge of the pad, to gesticulate in approval as King Kragen ate.

The tray was empty. King Kragen made no motion to depart; Blasdel swung about, gestured to an understudy. "The sponges: how many were offered?"

"Seven bushels. King Kragen usually eats no more."

"Today he seems to hunger. Are others plucked?"

"Those for the market: another five bushels."

"They had best be tendered King Kragen; it is not well to stint." While King Kragen floated motionless, the coracles were pulled to the float, another five bushels were poured upon the tray, and the tray thrust back toward King Kragen. Again he ate, consuming all but a bushel or two. Then, replete, he submerged till only his turret remained above the water. And there he remained, moving sluggishly a few feet forward, a few feet backward.

NINE days later a haggard Denis Maible reported the

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capture of Henry Bastoff to the Seven. "On the following day King Kragen had not yet moved. It was clear that the new method of feeding had impressed him favorably. So at noon the tray was again filled, with at least ten bushels of sponge, and again King Kragen devoured the lot.

"During this time we learned that Henry Bastaff had been captured and condemned—indeed the news had gone out over the hoodwink towers—but we could not discover where he was imprisoned or what fate had been planned for him.

"On the third day Blasdel made an announcement, to the effect that the dissident spy had sinned against King Kragen and King Kragen had demanded the privilege of executing him.

"At noon the tray went out. At the very top was a wide board supporting a single great sponge; and below, the usual heap. King Kragen had not moved fifty yards for three days. He approached the tray, reached for the topmost sponge. It seemed fastened to the board. King Kragen jerked, and so decapitated Henry Bastaff, whose head had been stuffed into the sponge. It was a horrible sight, with the blood spouting upon the pile of sponges. King Kragen seemed to devour them with particular relish.

"With Henry Bastaff dead, we no longer had reason to delay—except for curiosity. King Kragen showed no signs of moving, of visiting the other floats. It was clear that he found the new feeding system to his liking. By then, Apprise Float was bereft of sponges.

"The Intercessors conferred by hoodwink and apparently arrived at a means of dealing with the situation. King Kragen's meal on the fourth day was furnished by Granolt Float and ferried to Apprise by coracle. On the fifth day the sponges were brought from Sankeston. It appears that King Kragen is now a permanent guest at Apprise Float . . . On the evening of the fifth day we launched our coracle and returned to New Float."

The Seven were silent. Phyral Berwick finally made a sound of nausea. "It is a repulsive situation. One which I would like to change."

Sklar Hast looked toward Meth Cagno. "There is the man who smelts metal."

Meth Cagno smiled wryly. "Our enterprises are multiplying. We have found a number of sources which when burnt in sufficiently large quantities produce at least four different metals. None seem to be iron. We have bled everyone on the float, twice or three times: this blood has yielded several pounds of iron, which we have hammered and re-

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fined until now it is hard and keen beyond all belief. Our electrical device has produced twenty-four flasks of acid of salt, which we maintain in bottles blown by our glass shop, which is now an establishment completely separated from the smelting."

"This is encouraging and interesting," said Robin Magram, "but what will it avail against King Kragen?"

Meth Cagno pursed his lips. "I have not yet completed my experiments, and I am unable to make an unequivocal answer. But in due course our preparations will be complete."

Chapter VII

SOME two hundred days later, toward the end of the year, swindlers working the waters to the east of Tranque Float spied the armada from the east. There were two dozen canoes sheathed with a dull black membrane. Each canoe carried a crew of thirty, who wore helmets and corselets of the same black substance, and carried lances tipped with orange metal. They accompanied a strange craft, like none ever seen before along the floats. It was rectangular, and rode on four parallel pontoons. A bulwark of the black sheating completely encircled the barge, to a height of five feet. Fore and aft rose stout platforms on which were mounted massive crossbow-like contrivances, the arms of which were laminated stalk and kragen chitin, and the string cables woven from strips of kragen leather. The hold of the barge contained two hundred glass vats, each of two quarts capacity, each two-thirds full of pale liquid. The barge was propelled by oars—a score on either side—and moved with not inconsiderable speed.

The swindlers paddled with all speed to Tranque Float and the hoodwink towers flickered an alarm: *The . . . dissidents . . . are . . . returning . . . in . . . force! They . . . come . . . in . . . strange . . . black . . . canoes . . . and . . . an . . . even . . . more . . . peculiar . . . black . . . barge. They . . . show . . . no . . . fear.*

The flotilla continued up the line of floats: Thrasneck, Bickle, Green Lamp, and at last Fay, Quatrefoil, and finally Apprise.

In the water before the lagoon lolled King Kragen—a bloated monstrous King Kragen, dwarfing the entire flotilla.

King Kragen swung about, the monstrous vanes sucking whirlpools into the ocean. The eyes with opalescent films shifting back and forth within, fixed upon the black sheathing of canoe, barge and armor, and he seemed to recognize the substance as kragen hide, for he emitted a

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snort of terrible displeasure, jerked his vanes, and the ocean sucked and swirled.

The barge swung sidewise to King Kragen. The two crossbows, each cocked and strung, each armed with an iron harpoon smelted from human blood, were aimed.

King Kragen sensed menace. Why otherwise should men be so bold? He twitched his vanes, inched forward—to within a hundred feet. Then he lunged. Vanes dug the water; with an ear-shattering shriek King Kragen charged, mandibles snapping.

The men at the crossbows were pale as sea-foam; their fingers twitched. Sklar Hast turned to call, "Fire!" but his voice caught in his throat and what he intended for an incisive command sounded as a startled stammer. But the command was understood. The left crossbow thudded, snapped, sang: the harpoon, trailing a black cable sprang at King Kragen's turret, buried itself. King Kragen hissed.

The right crossbow fired; the second harpoon stabbed deep into the turret. Sklar Hast motioned with his hand to the men in the hold. "Connect." The men joined copper to copper. In the hold two hundred voltaic cells, each holding ten thin-leaved cathodes and ten thin-leaved anodes, connected first in four series of fifty, and these four series in parallel, poured a gush of electricity along the copper cables wrapped in varnished pad-skin, which led to the harpoons. Into King Kragen's turret poured the energy, and King Kragen went stiff. His vanes protruded at right angles to his body. Sklar Hast said to Meth Cagno, "Your experiments seem to be as valid as with the lesser kragen—luckily."

"I never doubted," said Meth Cagno.

SKLAR HAST waved to the canoes. They swung toward King Kragen, beaching on the rigid subsurface platform. The men swarmed up the torso. With mallets and copper chisels they attacked the lining between dome and turret wall. There was thirty feet of seam, but many hands at work. The lining was broken; bars were inserted into the crack; all heaved. With a splitting sound the dome was dislodged. It slid over and into the water; the men leapt down into the knotted gray cords and nodes and began hacking.

On Apprise Float a great throng had gathered. One man, running back and forth, was Barquan Blasdel. Finally he persuaded several score of men to embark in coracles and attack the flotilla. Eight black canoes were on guard. Paddles dug the water, the canoes picked up momentum,

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crashed into the foremost coracles, crushing the fragile shells, throwing the men into the water. The canoes backed away, turned toward the other coracles, which retreated.

Out in the lagoon King Kragen's nerve nodes had been cast into the sea. The harpoons were extracted, the flow of electricity extinguished.

King Kragen floated limp, a lifeless hulk. The men plunged into the sea to wash themselves, clambered back up on the dead swimming platform, boarded their canoes.

The barge now eased toward Apprise Float. Barquin Blasdel gesticulated to the folk like a crazy man. "To arms! Stakes, chisels, mallets, knives, bludgeons! Smite the miscreants!"

Sklar Hast called to the throng, "King Kragen is dead. What do you say to this?"

There was silence; then a faint cheer and a louder cheer, and finally uproarious celebration.

Sklar Hast pointed a finger at Barquan Blasdel. "That man must die. He murdered Henry Bastaff. He has fed your food to the vile King Kragen. He would have continued doing so until King Kragen over-grew the entire float."

Barquan Blasdel made the mistake of turning to flee—an act which triggered the counter-impulse to halt him. When he was touched, he smote, and again he erred, for the blow brought a counter-blow and Barquan Blasdel was presently torn to pieces.

"What now?" called the crowd. "What now, Sklar Hast?"

"Nothing whatever, unless you choose to kill the other Intercessors. King Kragen is dethroned; our duty is done. We now return to the New Floats."

From the shore someone called out, "Come ashore, men of the New Floats, and share our great joy. Greet your old friends, who long have been saddened at your absence! Tonight the arrack will flow and we will play the pipes and dance in the light of our yellow lamps!"

Sklar Hast shook his head, waved his hand and called back: "Now we return to the New Floats. In a week certain of us will return, and the weeks after that will see constant traffic between Old and New Floats, and out to floats still unknown. King Kragen is dead, the lesser kragen are our prey, so who is there to stop us? Now that we know metal and glass and electricity, all things are possible. Rejoice with all our good will. For now, farewell."

The barge and the canoes swung about; oars and paddles dipped into the ocean, the black flotilla receded into the east, and disappeared.

THE END

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DESCENDING

BY THOMAS M. DISCH

Illustrator ADRAGNA

Next time you're on an escalator someplace, keep your wits about you.

CATSUP, mustard, pickle relish, mayonnaise, two kinds of salad dressing, bacon grease, and a lemon. Oh yes, two trays of ice cubes. In the cupboard it wasn't much better: jars and boxes of spice, flour, sugar, salt —and a box of raisins!

An empty box of raisins.

Not even any coffee. Not even tea, which he hated. Nothing in the mailbox but a bill from Underwood's: *Unless we receive the arrears on your account. . . .*

$4.75 in change jingled in his coat pocket—the plunder of the Chianti bottle he had promised himself never to break open. He was spared the unpleasantness of having to sell his books. They had all been sold. The letter to Graham had gone out a week ago. If his brother intended to send something this time, it would have come by now.

—I should be desperate, he thought.—Perhaps I am.

He might have looked in the *Times*. But, no, that was too depressing—applying for jobs at $50 a week and being turned down. Not that he blamed them; he wouldn't have hired himself,

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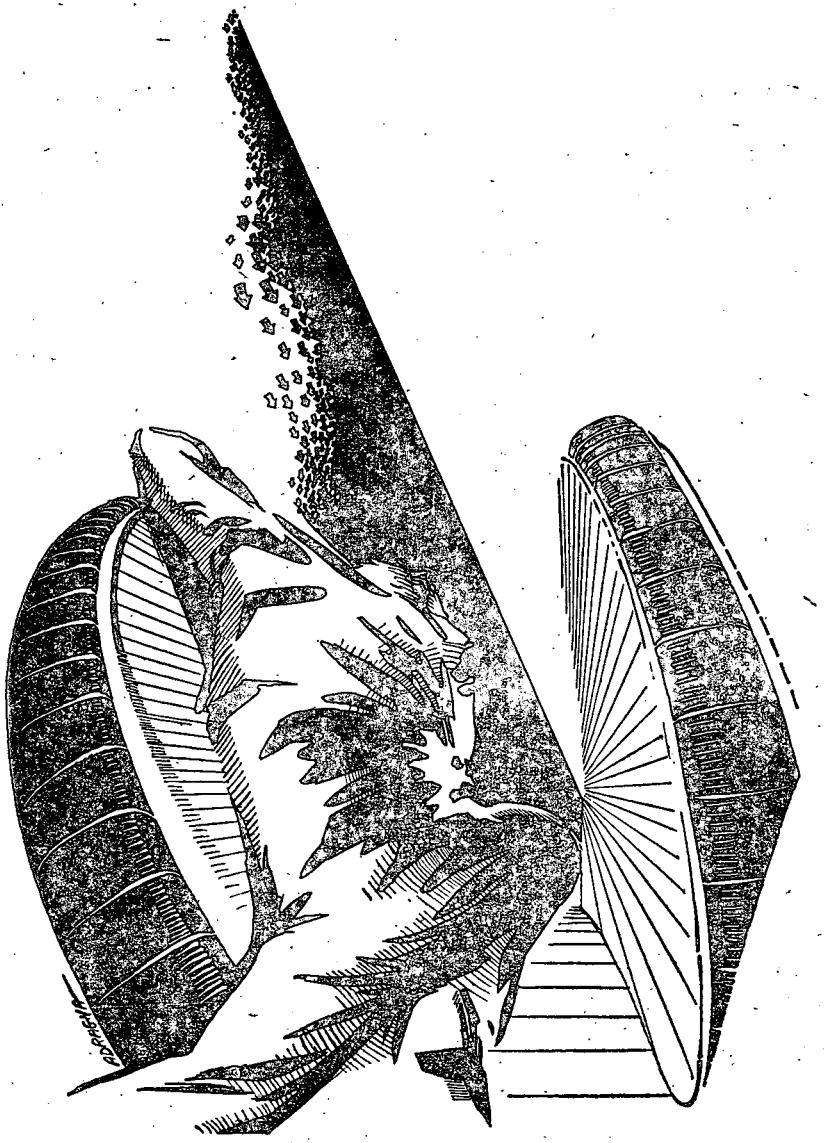

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himself. He had been a grasshopper for years. The ants were on to his tricks.

He shaved without soap and brushed his shoes to a high polish. He whitened the sepulchre of his unwashed torso with a fresh, starched shirt and chose his somberest tie from the rack. He began to feel excited and expressed it, characteristically, by appearing statuesquely, icily calm.

Descending the stairway to the first floor, he encountered Mrs. Beale, who was pretending to sweep the well-swept floor of the entrance.

"Good afternoon—or I s'pose it's good morning for you, eh?"

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Beale."

"Your letter come?"

"Not yet."

"The first of the month isn't far off."

"Yes indeed, Mrs. Beale."

At the subway station he considered a moment before answering the attendant: One token or two? Two, he decided. After all, he had no choice but to return to his apartment. The first of the month was still a long way off.

—If Jean Valjean had had a charge account, he would have never gone to prison.

Having thus cheered himself, he settled down to enjoy the ads in the subway car. *Smoke. Try. Eat. Give. See. Drink. Use. Buy.* He thought of Alice with her mushrooms: Eat me.

At 34th Street he got off and entered Underwood's Department Store directly from the train platform. On the main floor he stopped at the cigar stand and bought a carton of cigarettes.

"Cash or charge?"

"Charge." He handed the clerk the laminated plastic card. The charge was rung up.

FANCY Groceries was on 5. He made his selection judiciously. A jar of instant and a 2-pound can of drip ground coffee, a large tin of corned beef, packaged soups and boxes of pancake mix and condensed milk. Jam, peanut butter, and honey. Six cans of tuna fish. Then, he indulged himself in perishables: English cookies, an Edam cheese, a small frozen pheasant—even fruitcake. He never ate so well as when he was broke. He couldn't afford to.

"$14.87."

This time after ringing up his charge, the clerk checked the number on his card against her list of closed or doubtful accounts. She smiled apologetically and handed the card back.

"Sorry, but we have to check."

"I understand."

The bag of groceries weighed a good twenty pounds. Carrying it with the exquisite casualness of a burglar passing before a policeman with his loot, he took the escalator to the bookshop on 8. His choice of books was deter-

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mined by the same principle as his choice of groceries. First, the staples: two Victorian novels he had never read, *Vanity Fair* and *Middlemarch*; the Sayers' translation of Dante, and a two-volume anthology of German plays none of which he had read and few he had even heard of. Then the perishables: a sensational novel that had reached the best seller list via the Supreme Court, and two mysteries.

He had begun to feel giddy with self-indulgence. He reached into his jacket pocket for a coin.

—Heads a new suit; tails the Sky Room.

Tails.

The Sky Room on 15 was empty of all but a few women chatting over coffee and cakes. He was able to get a seat by a window. He ordered from the a la Carte side of the menu and finished his meal with Espresso and baklava. He handed the waitress his credit card and tipped her fifty cents.

Dawdling over his second cup of coffee, he began *Vanity Fair*. Rather to his surprise, he found himself enjoying it. The waitress returned with his card and a receipt for the meal.

Since the Sky Room was on the top floor of Underwood's, there was only one escalator to take now—Descending. Riding down, he continued to read *Vanity Fair*. He could read anywhere—in restaurants, on subways, even walking down the street. At each landing he made his way from the foot of one escalator to the head of the next without lifting his eyes from the book. When he came to the Bargain Basement, he would be only a few steps from the subway turnstile.

He was halfway through Chapter VI (on page 55, to be exact) when he began to feel something amiss.

—How long does this damn thing take to reach the basement?

He stopped at the next landing, but there was no sign to indicate on what floor he was nor any door by which he might reenter the store. Deducing from this that he was between floors, he took the escalator down one more flight only to find the same perplexing absence of landmarks.

There was, however, a water fountain, and he stooped to take a drink.

—I must have gone to a subbasement. But this was not too likely after all. Escalators were seldom provided for janitors and stockboys.

He waited on the landing watching the steps of the escalator slowly descend toward him and, at the end of their journey, telescope in upon themselves and disappear. He waited a long while, and no one else came down the moving steps.

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—Perhaps the store has closed. Having no wristwatch and having rather lost track of the time, he had no way of knowing. At last, he reasoned that he had become so engrossed in the Thackeray novel that he had simply stopped on one of the upper landings—say, on 8—to finish a chapter and had read on to page 55 without realizing that he was making no progress on the escalators.

When he read, he could forget everything else.

He must, therefore, still be somewhere above the main floor. The absence of exits, though disconcerting, could be explained by some quirk in the floor plan. The absence of signs was merely a carelessness on the part of the management.

HE tucked *Vanity Fair* into his shopping bag and stepped onto the grilled lip of the downgoing escalator—not, it must be admitted, without a certain degree of reluctance. At each landing, he marked his progress by a number spoken aloud. By *eight* he was uneasy; by *fifteen* he was desperate.

It was, of course, possible that he had to descend two flights of stairs for every floor of the department store. With this possibility in mind, he counted off fifteen more landings.

—No.

Dazedly and as though to deny the reality of this seemingly interminable stairwell, he continued his descent. When he stopped again at the forty-fifth landing, he was trembling. He was afraid.

He rested the shopping bag on the bare concrete floor of the landing, realizing that his arm had gone quite sore from supporting the twenty pounds and more of groceries and books. He discounted the enticing possibility that "it was all a dream," for the dream-world is the reality of the dreamer, to which he could not weakly surrender, no more than he could surrender to the realities of life. Besides, he was not dreaming; of that he was quite sure.

He checked his pulse. It was fast—say, eighty a minute. He rode down two more flights, counting his pulse. Eighty almost exactly. Two flights took only one minute.

He could read approximately one page a minute, a little less on an escalator. Suppose he had spent one hour on the escalators while he had read: sixty minutes —one hundred and twenty floors. Plus forty-seven that he had counted. One hundred sixty seven. The Sky Room was on 15.

$167 - 15 = 152$.

He was in the one-hundred-fifty-second sub-basement. That was impossible.

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The appropriate response to an impossible situation was to deal with it as though it were commonplace—like Alice in Wonderland. Ergo, he would return to Underwood's the same way he had (apparently) left it. He would walk up one hundred fifty two flights of down-going escalators. Taking the steps three at a time and running, it was almost like going up a regular staircase. But after ascending the second escalator in this manner, he found himself already out of breath.

There was no hurry. He would not allow himself to be overtaken by panic.

No.

He picked up the bag of groceries and books he had left on that landing, waiting for his breath to return, and darted up a third and fourth flight. While he rested on the landing, he tried to count the steps between floors, but his count differed depending on whether he counted with the current or against it, down or up. The average was roughly eighteen steps, and the steps appeared to be eight or nine inches deep. Each flight was, therefore, about twelve feet.

It was one-third of a mile, as the plumb drops, to Underwood's main floor.

Dashing up the ninth escalator, the bag of groceries broke open at the bottom, where the thawing pheasant had dampened the paper. Groceries and books tumbled onto the steps, some rolling of their own accord to the landing below, others being transported there by the moving stairs and forming a neat little pile. Only the jam jar had been broken.

He stacked the groceries in the corner of the landing, except for the half-thawed pheasant, which he stuffed into his coat pocket, anticipating that his ascent would take him well past his dinner hour.

Physical exertion had dulled his finer feelings—to be precise, his capacity for fear. Like a cross-country runner in his last laps, he thought single-mindedly of the task at hand and made no effort to understand what he had in any case already decided was not to be understood. He mounted one flight, rested, mounted and rested again. Each mount was wearier; each rest longer. He stopped counting the landings after the twenty-eighth, and some time after that—how long he had no idea—his legs gave out and he collapsed to the concrete floor of the landing. His calves were hard aching knots of muscle; his thighs quivered erratically. He tried to do knee-bends and fell backwards.

Despite his recent dinner (assuming that it had been recent), he was hungry and he devoured

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the entire pheasant, completely thawed now, without being able to tell if it were raw or had been pre-cooked.

—This is what it's like to be a cannibal, he thought as he fell asleep.

SLEEPING, he dreamt he was falling down a bottomless pit. Waking, he discovered nothing had changed, except the dull ache in his legs, which had become a sharp pain.

Overhead, a single strip of fluorescent lighting snaked down the stairwell. The mechanical purr of the escalators seemed to have heightened to the roar of a Niagra, and their rate of descent seemed to have increased proportionately.

Fever, he decided. He stood up stiffly and flexed some of the soreness from his muscles.

Halfway up the third escalator, his legs gave way under him. He attempted the climb again and succeeded. He collapsed again on the next flight. Lying on the landing where the escalator had deposited him, he realized that his hunger had returned. He also needed to have water—and to let it.

The latter necessity he could easily—and without false modesty—satisfy. Also he remembered the water fountain he had drunk from yesterday and he found another three floors below.

—It's so much easier going down.

His groceries were down there. To go after them now, he would erase whatever progress he had made in his ascent. Perhaps Underwood's main floor was only a few more flights up. Or a hundred. There was no way to know.

Because he was hungry and because he was tired and because the futility of mounting endless flights of descending escalators was, as he now considered it, a labor of Sisyphus, he returned, descended, gave in.

At first, he allowed the escalator to take him along at its own mild pace, but he soon grew impatient of this. He found that the exercise of running down the steps three at a time was not so exhausting as running *up*. It was refreshing, almost. And, by swimming with the current instead of against it, his progress, if such it can be called, was appreciable. In only minutes he was back at his cache of groceries.

After eating half the fruitcake and a little cheese, he fashioned his coat into a sort of sling for the groceries, knotting the sleeves together and buttoning it closed. With one hand at the collar and the other about the hem, he could carry all his food with him.

He looked up the descending staircase with a scornful smile,

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for he had decided with the wisdom of failure to abandon *that* venture. If the stairs wished to take him down, then down, giddily, he would go.

Then, down he did go, down dizzily, down, down and always, it seemed, faster, spinning about lightly on his heels at each landing so that there was hardly any break in the wild speed of his descent. He whooped and halooed and laughed to hear his whoopings echo in the narrow, low-vaulted corridors, following him as though they could not keep up his pace.

Down, ever deeper down.

Twice he slipped at the landings and once he missed his footing in mid-leap on the escalator, hurtled forward, letting go of the sling of groceries and falling, hands stretched out to cushion him, onto the steps, which, imperturbably, continued their descent.

He must have been unconscious then, for he woke up in a pile of groceries with a split cheek and a splitting headache. The telescoping steps of the escalator gently grazed his heels.

He knew then his first moment of terror—a premonition that there was no *end* to his descent, but this feeling gave way quickly to a laughing fit.

"I'm going to hell!" he shouted, though he could not drown with his voice the steady purr of the escalators. "This is the way to hell. Abandon hope all ye who enter here."

—If only I were, he reflected. —If that were the case, it would make sense. Not quite orthodox sense, but some sense, a little.

Sanity, however, was so integral to his character that neither hysteria nor horror could long have their way with him. He gathered up his groceries again; relieved to find that only the jar of instant coffee had been broken this time. After reflection he also discarded the can of drip-ground coffee, for which he could conceive no use—under the present circumstances. And he would allow himself, for the sake of sanity, to conceive of no other circumstances than those.

HE began a more deliberate descent. He returned to *Vanity Fair*, reading it as he paced down the down-going steps. He did not let himself consider the extent of the abyss into which he was plunging, and the vicarious excitements of the novel helped him keep his thoughts from his own situation. At page 235, he lunched (that is, he took his second meal of the day) on the remainder of the cheese and fruitcake; at 523 he rested and dined on the English cookies dipped in peanut butter.

—Perhaps I had better ration my food.

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If he could regard his absurd dilemma merely as a struggle for survival, another chapter in his own Robinson-Crusoe story, he might get to the bottom of this mechanized vortex alive and sane. He thought proudly that many people in his position could not have adjusted, would have gone mad.

Of course, he *was* descending. . . .

But he was still sane. He had chosen his course and now he was following it.

There was no night in the stairwell, and scarcely any shadows. He slept when his legs could no longer bear his weight and his eyes were tearful from reading. Sleeping, he dreamt that he was continuing his descent on the escalators. Waking, his hand resting on the rubber railing that moved along at the same rate as the steps, he discovered this to be the case.

Somnambulistically, he had ridden the escalators further down into this mild, interminable hell, leaving behind his bundle of food and even the still-unread Thackeray novel.

Stumbling up the escalators, he began, for the first time, to cry. Without the novel, there was nothing to *think* of but this, this. . . .

—How far? How long did I sleep?

His legs, which had only been slightly wearied by his descent, gave out twenty flights up. His spirit gave out soon after. Again he turned around, allowed himself to be swept up by the current—or, more exactly, swept down.

The escalator seemed to be travelling more rapidly, the pitch of the steps to be more pronounced. But he no longer trusted the evidence of his senses.

—I am, perhaps, insane—or sick from hunger. Yet, I would have run out of food eventually. This will bring the crisis to a head. Optimism, that's the spirit!

CONTINUING his descent, he occupied himself with a closer analysis of his environment, not undertaken with any hope of bettering his condition but only for lack of other diversions. The walls and ceilings were hard, smooth, and off-white. The escalator steps were a dull nickel color, the treads being somewhat shinier, the crevices darker. Did that mean that the treads were polished from use? Or were they designed in that fashion? The treads were half an inch wide and spaced apart from each other by the same width. They projected slightly over the edge of each step, resembling somewhat the head of a barber's shears. Whenever he stopped at a landing, his attention would become

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fixed on the illusory "disappearance" of the steps, as they sank flush to the floor and slid, tread in groove, into the grilled baseplate.

Less and less would he run, or even walk, down the stairs, content merely to ride his chosen step from top to bottom of each flight and, at the landing, step (left foot, right, and left again) onto the escalator that would transport him to the floor below. The stairwell now had tunneled, by his calculations, miles beneath the department store—so many miles that he began to congratulate himself upon his unsought adventure, wondering if he had established some sort of record. Just so, a criminal will stand in awe of his own baseness and be most proud of his vilest crime, which he believes unparalleled.

In the days that followed, when his only nourishment was the water from the fountains provided at every tenth landing, he thought frequently of food, preparing imaginary meals from the store of groceries he had left behind, savoring the ideal sweetness of the honey, the richness of the soup which he would prepare by soaking the powder in the emptied cookie tin, locking the film of gelatin lining the opened can of corned beef. When he thought of the six cans of tuna fish, his anxiety became intolerable, for he had (would have had) no way to open them. Merely to stamp on them would not be enough. What, then? He turned the question over and over in his head, like a squirrel spinning the wheel in its cage, to no avail.

Then a curious thing happened. He quickened again the speed of his descent, faster now than when first he had done this, eagerly, headlong, absolutely heedless. The several landings seemed to flash by like a montage of Flight, each scarcely perceived before the next was before him. A demonic, pointless race—and why? He was running, so he thought, toward his store of groceries, either believing that they had been left *below* or thinking that he was running *up*. Clearly, he was delirious.

It did not last. His weakened body could not maintain the frantic pace, and he woke from his delirium confused and utterly spent. Now began another, more rational delirium, a madness fired by logic. Lying on the landing, rubbing a torn muscle in his ankle, he speculated on the nature, origin and purpose of the escalators. Reasoned thought was of no more use to him, however, than unreasoning action. Ingenuity was helpless to solve a riddle that had no answer, which was it own reason, self-contained and whole. He—not the escalators—needed an answer.

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PERHAPS his most interesting theory was the notion that these escalators were a kind of exercise wheel, like those found in a squirrel cage, from which, because it was a closed system, there could be no escape. This theory required some minor alterations in his conception of the physical universe, which had always appeared highly Euclidean to him before, a universe in which his descent seemingly along a plumb-line was, in fact, describing a loop. This theory cheered him, for he might hope, coming full circle, to return to his store of groceries again, if not to Underwood's. Perhaps in his abstracted state he had passed one or the other already several times without observing.

There was another, and related, theory concerning the measures taken by Underwood's Credit Department against delinquent accounts. This was mere paranoia.

—Theories! I don't need theories. I must get on with it.

So, favoring his good leg, he continued his descent, although his speculations did not immediately cease. They became, if anything, more metaphysical. They became vague. Eventually, he could regard the escalators as being entirely matter-of-fact, requiring no more explanation than, by their sheer existence, they offered him.

He discovered that he was losing weight. Being so long without food (by the evidence of his beard, he estimated that more than a week had gone by), this was only to be expected. Yet, there was another possibility that he could not exclude: that he was approaching the center of the earth where, as he understood, all things were weightless.

—Now *that*, he thought, is something worth striving for.

He had discovered a goal. On the other hand, he was dying, a process he did not give all the attention it deserved. Unwilling to admit this eventuality and yet not so foolish as to admit any other, he side-stepped the issue by pretending to hope.

—Maybe someone will rescue me, he hoped.

But his hope was as mechanical as the escalators he rode—and tended, in much the same way, to sink.

Waking and sleeping were no longer distinct states of which he could say: "Now I am sleeping," or "Now I am awake." Sometimes he would discover himself descending and be unable to tell whether he had been woken from sleep or roused from inattention.

He hallucinated.

A woman, loaded with packages from Underwood's and wearing a trim, pillbox-style hat, came down the escalator toward him, turned around on the land-

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ing, high heels clicking smartly, and rode away without even nodding to him.

More and more, when he awoke or was roused from his stupor, he found himself, instead of hurrying to his goal, lying on a landing, weak, dazed, and beyond hunger. Then, he would crawl to the down-going escalator and pull himself onto one of the steps, which he would ride to the bottom, sprawled head foremost, hands and shoulders braced against the treads to keep from skittering bumpily down.

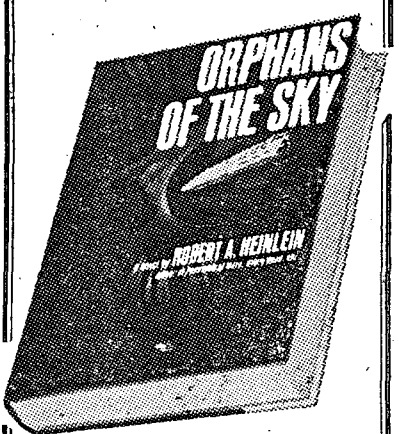
—At the bottom, he thought, —at the bottom. . . . I will . . . when I get there. . . .

FROM the bottom, which he conceived of as the center of the earth, there would be literally nowhere to go but up. Probably by another chain of escalators, ascending escalators, but preferably by an elevator. It was important to believe in a bottom.

Thought was becoming as difficult, as demanding and painful, as once his struggle to ascend had been. His perceptions were fuzzy. He did not know what was real and what imaginery. He thought he was eating and discovered he was gnawing at his hands.

He thought he had come to the bottom. It was a large, high-ceilinged room. Signs pointed to another escalator: *Ascending*. But

The new Heinlein!



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there was a chain across it and a small typed announcement.

"Out of order. Please bear with us while the escalators are being repaired. Thank you. The Management."

He laughed weakly.

He devised a way to open the tuna fish cans. He would slip the can sideways beneath the projecting treads of the escalator, just at the point where the steps were sinking flush to the floor. Either the escalator would split the can open or the can would jam the escalator. Perhaps if one escalator were jammed the whole chain of them would stop. He should have thought of that before, but he was, nevertheless, quite pleased to have thought of it at all.

—I might have escaped.

His body seemed to weigh so little now. He must have come hundreds of miles. Thousands.

Again, he descended.

Then, he was lying at the foot of the escalator. His head rested on the cold metal of the baseplate and he was looking at his hand, the fingers of which were pressed into the creviced grill. One after another, in perfect order, the steps of the escalator slipped into these crevices, tread in groove, rasping at his fingertips, occasionally tearing away a sliver of his flesh.

That was the last thing he remembered.

THE END

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There are many kinds of pain—some harder to bear than others. There are at least two kinds of dying. There is terror and there is softness. Prof. Bunch explains all these to his class in . . .

The College of Acceptable Death

By DAVID R. BUNCH

IT was twelve uneasy little-war years after a peace that I set up my very successful College of Acceptable Death. The courses were all jam-packed. We did it mostly by demonstration . . .

We opened with people slicing close copies of dachshunds nose-first through standard boloney slicers, and over it all was the sound of agony from little things being squeezed, like mice in the grip of anvils, and cats were being sat upon by heavy-hauling truck tires. Our slogans blasted the room, in hot compelling neons, and mottoes by the dozens danced and advised death. A butcher's case in a corner displayed fine meat cuts and a sign saying, "Don't forget that Ferdinand once had stomach trouble from daisies, switched at horseflies in long summer afternoons and waited for cows that never came to the old watering tank by the hedge trees." Then a long, bright sirloin was held aloft by two rubber hands in the display, and the hands kept flexing the steak in a most lascivious manner to the tune of a catchy butcher-shop refrain that was saying:

Ferdinand is peaceful now,
Ferdinand is peaceful;
No more the horseflies worry
him,
Ferdinand is peaceful.
He forgets the deceitful cow!

"WE WILL BEGIN THE CLASSES! ORDER IN THE CLASSROOM!" I yelled through all the speakers my room had. I danced up and down, rumpled my hair and was ready to lacerate myself with

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sharp pencils to let my class see that I was really sincere and that I honestly wanted to begin the instruction. As they grew quiet, calmly I stepped aside on the big stage while my assistants wheeled in the fire show.

A copy of an oil-soaked man strode quickly into a furnace that was all fire-glass sides, and as he exploded to cherry flame his teeth swept a white line of agony through barely parted lips, and when his hair vanished in a sudden *poouf* a grimace of utter pain suffused his death-built grin. The shrieks came over the loud-speakers so that the ears of all were filled with the feel of burning, and when near the end of his going out by fire he got up from where he had fallen and walked—with his flaky feet charring to bone stubs—across to beat at a small and hopeless door the shrieks of the class audience mixed with his crying from the speakers until there was nothing but the horror and feel of ultimate inescapable pain in the room. Still we were schooling our people, and that was well. OH, REALITY . . .

Next we wheeled in a windmill-bladed chamber that was glass on all four sides, and we parked it across from a knife thrower who had a dark moustache and a grin of cold malignancy, while his look of confidence and the cool way he constantly flexed his long card-trick hands seemed to bespeak a deadly skill that was unarguable. When a rubber child got up from deep in the glass-sided chamber and started to run along a peaceful way with his red and pink striped play-more ball among the windmills, we filled the place with blades at the press of a switch. The windmills turned until they blurred and vanished, and oscillating they hacked the child to jelly-blood and bits in his innocence, jig-jag, back-and-forth, slice-slice, up-and-down. All but his head. And the red and pink striped play-more ball. These bounced around among the oscillating windmills and gave direction to an otherwise almost invisible white performance, and gave the class audience, I believe, a kind of wild sick hope for the child's head and the ball. But I need not tell you. You know what happened. Yes! A small round window opened in the glass-sided chamber. And he started throwing those long stiletto blades—*wup wup wup*, at the child's head and the ball. He ever missed. When he had a dozen or so slim blades nearly buried, expertly placed, in the child's head and the ball, he stood unwinding his slim black moustache, which he had trained to spell Hah. Smiling and bowing low to his audience—my class—which had collapsed now and lay wailing along the floor, he seemed

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especially malignant. Was death so bad?

Well, we were getting them ready.

AS a kind of cool relief from the warm action of the fire-chamber, the windmill blades and the hissing hot stilettos, not to mention the sliced dachshunds, the mice squeezed, the cats sat upon and Ferdinand waiting for cows, we gave the audience a cold show of suffering in the snow. In a month that looked like November we had red hearts along drifted snow-tall lanes until the chiseled setting looked like a misplaced mid-month of February misadventure. But it was not. It was what we wanted. As the class audience picked itself up from where it had collapsed from the unrelieved horror of the windmill blades and the knifethrower we loosed the snow scene to action. Young cardboard people with hot unthinking gestures ran barefoot in the chiseled snow-lanes to the heart places and found them to be not warm and meaningful hearts, not even boxes of candy. They found them to be what they looked to be, cold red paper hearts in a snowdrift. But with one important addition. The hearts were backed with generous portions of sponges. And when the hot young people clasped the red-heart sponges to the heart regions of their own agitated breasts there began the terrible action of acids thawing. Sometimes there would be the almost instantaneous sound of explosion, and a chest would blow four-windsward and pat-pat to the snow, but more often it was just the slow action of acid eating and people clasping the red hungry gnawing hearts, unable to fling them away until a hole that was almost half a chest big gaped under unbelieving faces. Then nerveless hands would drop the acid sponges, and in the snow-tall lanes zombie faces went without a heart, without even their own heart, having gambled for a heart's gain and known instead a heart's loss in some terrible strange deficit. And they grew old there, so very old there—after the time of their hot young hopes—plucking the cast-down hearts up hopefully, so very hopefully, wan faces, grief-hollowed faces, ransacking the faceless snow for something salvagable in the heart-loss land. And a low moan began in the audience and grew in volume and rose and fell, eddied and swirled, like a wind with strange gaps in it, and looking at the tortured aspects of the class audience there with their own heart's torture, victims of the acid-eating times, one was somehow reminded of a speckled scream. "That too?" some shrieked. "That too,

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in deathland? I had been promised to burn quietly. Oh, everlastingly to burn for sins, he told us, but I thought quietly in agony in really honest flames, lying like some grease bag frying loglike never to consume. The acid burning of this heart country I could not—" Then the eyes bulged, stricken, terrible, out of the whitened faces. This was death! finality! they suddenly realized. The audience seethed, lashed at itself, fell down in terror, pounded along the walls.

In the afternoon we lectured to them quietly of the horror of man-in-passage. We tried to be calm, reasonable. We had stirred them enough, we felt, with our drama of the morning, and we knew how their hearts must be lunging now in clammy stricken fear. I could hear those hearts, hear them from the rostrum when I listened, hear their *pud-pud-pud*. Grimly I pursued my course dispassionately for their instruction. A sane calm view was the gift, the great gift . . .

THEN the glass man came on all covered with *U's* and *you you you you you*. His inner workings were in order there to see; his brain was a book where every thought could be read. And over him hovered a tremendous snowbeard that hung between two balls that were bigger than medicine balls, and these were the eyeballs. And though the beard blew to and fro in casual indifferences, the eyes never left the you-man. Sometimes the beard would project two hands, white as itself, and flick up hinged parts of the you-man so the eyes could better see. More often the white hands flicked up the hinged top of the you-man's head so the brain there could be read like a book. A record high in the loft of the building kept hissing softly, "God sees—God sees—God sees —YOU." The you-man tried to get away. He ran and hid in a corner under some paper sacks, dissembling his thoughts. But a white hand casually flipped him uncovered and a medicine-ball eyeball crawled in to have a better look while a record played, "You can't get away from the eyeballs of God, you can't, you can't." The audience—some of them—tittered, and then, suddenly realizing they had tittered at God and God's eyeballs, they fell down in a sick fainting and tried to hide. But of course they could not hide. We told them that. They should've known they could not hide from the God they loved and his eyeballs.

A pink light came on in the white building; a pink glow softer than a June rose petal played over all the faces. They had just risen from a prostrate display of fear, so the pink made a nice show on their white blanched

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skins. Their wildly heaving breasts and overall demeanor of greatest terror told us that they could never face death on the terms that had been established. But they did not have to. It was a trick! We wheeled out the big fat zeros, the ovals of soft gray rubber. We let a fan gently waft these up and down and about. We had them come to rest on soft beds of gray rubber flowers. We had big rubber graves, gray rubber graves, soft rubber graves—softness, softness, softness. Softness was the keynote. A record gently played:

Death is softness, softness, softness;
Softness is death, death, death—
Soft soft soft death . . .

The faces showed puzzlement and a straining need to believe. "Believe!" a voice shrieked. "Believe!" It was my voice. "The terrors you have seen—the flames, the blades, the hearts' acid—were not of death. They were of life. These things are you—NOW! YOUR LIVES! And the terrible eyeballs watching around the terrible beard—they are you—your thoughts, nothing else. You made them. Imagine such a contraption being interested in you zeros! Ha ha." Then a record began to play:

Come on little zeros,
Get your death, get your grass,
Get your rubber leaves;
Blow like a bubble to your big soft
Rubber graves.
Lie down. Lie down in gray dark.
Lie down. Lie down.
Rest rest rest . . .

Like a great intake and outgo of some terrible bellows the breath of relief wheezed in that comforted room. They had seen the light, they had come to know the gyp, and working fast we were ready when they came. The whole room moved in concert for their ease. Across the stage, breaking on us like multicolored waves, they came. We touched the button that kicked the whole wall free back of the stage and they all flowed in to where a soft gray shimmer hovered in the air and an elusive blur made an ease-picture that was hard to describe. The million razor-thin chopper blade whirring just under the shimmer and in the ease-picture hard to describe diced them to liquid people, chopped record played a new light cemetery hit tune they were all machine-packaged in zero bags for interment in the big gray zero graves back of our building.

Having graduated our class we took the next day off to recuperate, go fishing and to clean and repair our equipment. But the day after that . . .

THE END

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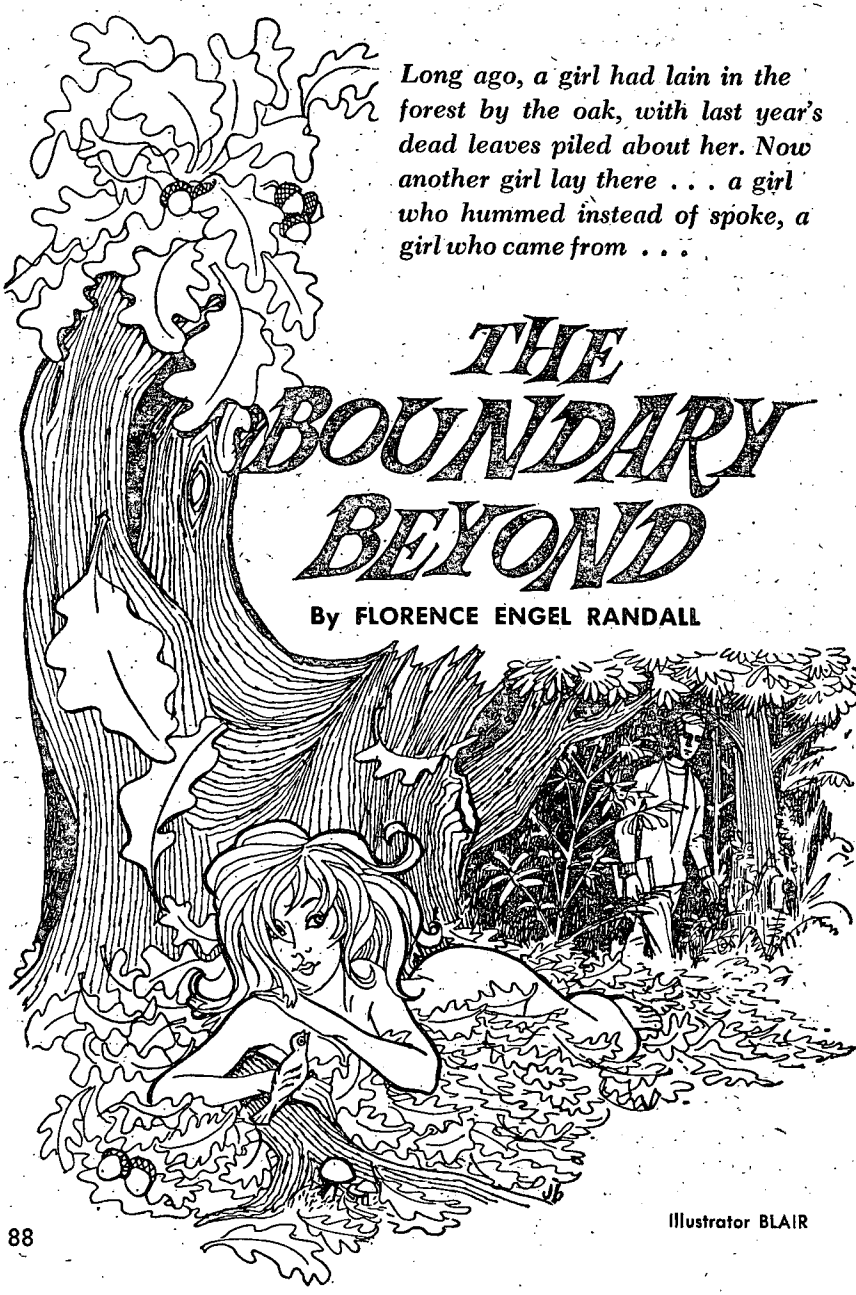
Long ago, a girl had lain in the forest by the oak, with last year's dead leaves piled about her. Now another girl lay there . . . a girl who hummed instead of spoke, a girl who came from . . .

THE BOUNDARY BEYOND

By FLORENCE ENGEL RANDALL



Illustrator BLAIR

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NOT far from where we live, the woods begin. No matter how hard the men work clearing the trees, no sooner do they turn their backs than the small seedlings seem to seed themselves. Spring is almost like fall with the air full of the rustling, bursting, drifting pods. It's as if there's a war going on between the trees and the fields with first one side and then, the other pushing forward. Sometimes, at night, when I can't sleep, I stand beside the window watching the trees. The branches move like weaving fingers edging the horizon with green lace. It is then when the house is quiet and the sky is low and black that I remember the time when Gabe found the Dryad.

I was seventeen then and tall for a girl but I wasn't as tall as Gabe. My sister, Christine, who was older and smaller than I, had slanting green eyes, high cheekbones and Gabe's ring on her finger. All that winter she and Mom had been sewing, folding fine linens and silks, whispering together, their mouths filled with pins and secrets. That was the winter when I felt I didn't belong anywhere—not in the house with my family nor walking the frozen fields, my hands jammed in my pockets, my breath leading the way, my breath smoking in front of me. That was the winter when I avoided Gabe, glad he was no longer my teacher, glad I was a senior now and didn't have to listen to the way he read poetry. I avoided Gabe as if we had never laughed together, had never been friends at all. I avoided him as much as possible and yet, when he went home again, I was as miserable as when he came.

That was the winter when everything inside of me seemed coated with ice like the black telephone wires, like the rutted country roads. I felt empathy for the bushes that were so frozen they snapped at a touch.

When spring came, however, the ground softened, the wires hummed and the bushes were supple again. Could I be any different? Christine and Gabe were going to be married. It was a fact that I had to accept and, loving them both, it was difficult to turn away from them. How could I not smile when Gabe did? How could I see happiness around me and turn my back? Somehow that made it even worse as if with my own softness, I had become more vulnerable. And yet, there were days when it was almost enough for me just to awake in the morning, enough just to open my eyes, every sense within me alert, stretching with my arms.

WOULD it have changed anything if I had gone with Gabe that day? I've often won-

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dered about it, knowing Gabe, knowing the way he thought, knowing the way he felt. Gabe moved as if he were compelled by an inner music, as if he were tuned in a different way from the rest of us. If there were any human who would be able to hear more than he should, see more than he should, it would be Gabe who listened with more than his ears and who saw with more than his eyes. If I had gone with him, perhaps I could have held his attention, perhaps we would have walked past that quiet place in the woods, unaware, not knowing, and all that happened afterwards would never have come to pass.

I have wondered about it and thought about it and I think that it really would have changed nothing if I had gone with Gabe. Gabe was a good teacher and sometimes when he read aloud, I, too, heard the music behind the words and there was an ache within me, a longing to see more, to hear more. I don't think I would have been able to stop him. I don't think I would have wanted to stop him.

It is only from what he told me that I know how it was with him that day. If I close my eyes, it is easy for me to see him as he was, moving through the woods, moving quietly, easily as if he belonged there. I can see him entering the clearing; Gabe standing very still right at the spot where the sun comes through at a slant so that the sunlight, itself, seems almost tangible, having an outline and a shape of its own. I can see Gabe frowning a little the way he always does when he concentrates, his arms at his sides, the sunlight framing him so that his hair seems lighter than it is, his eyes darker.

Usually I was the one who walked with Gabe. But there was this restlessness, this unhappiness within me.

"Come with me, Melinda," he had urged.

"No," I had said stubbornly, afraid to be alone with him, afraid that I would show him how I felt and yet, longing to go.

He didn't ask Christine at all. He knew better than to ask Christine. She hated to walk in the woods. She said it made her legs ache and that it was boring but we all knew it was because she was afraid. When she was very little, she had been lost and although it was still daytime where we lived, still daylight at our house, still sunny in the open fields, in the woods it had been dark with the shadows long and deep. By the time Christine had been found, she had been curled next to the big oak. That was the one in the very center of the forest, in the center of the clearing and it was the tallest and the oldest of all the trees. It stood

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proud and alone. The men with the axes had always avoided it, loathe to touch it. My father once said that was because its trunk is so large and thick that even with arms outstretched it's impossible to encircle more than a quarter of it at a tie. I know better. I think they left that tree alone because they were afraid as if in some queer way the tree was as aware of them as they were of it. Even then, they were in awe of it. They must have had a feeling, an emotion about it as Christine did, as I did; Christine hating it, fearing it as she hated and feared anything she couldn't understand and I, loving it because it was tall and strong and beautiful.

IT was there that Gabe found the girl, found her lying the way Christine had lain so long ago with the leaves of last year, the dead, discarded leaves of another year piled over and around her.

At first, he just knelt beside her, his eyes wondering. He put out his hand and touched her hair, then, drew back like he had burnt his fingers.

"Are you lost? Are you hurt? What are you doing here?"

He asked all the questions with the only sound his own voice and the clammering excitement of the birds; blue jays yammering, crows screaming.

"Are you all right?" Gabe said.

She stared at him and then, the corners of her lips turned up as if she were practicing how to smile. Her eyes were brown and soft like the eyes of the woodland things; slim and pliant she was as a young tree and her hair which was the color of the oak leaves in fall fell about her shoulders.

Gabe spoke. She listened but she was only listening to the sound of his voice, the kindness, the gentleness of his voice, the voice Gabe used with any shy young animal. To such a voice a puppy would respond, tail thumping; to such a sound, a kitten would stretch a tentative paw. She responded too, humming deep in her throat as if she had no other speech and with that, the birds were quiet.

When we saw him again, he was a small figure at the edge of the fields, blurred by the distance. I had been watching for him, pretending that I was sitting on the front steps only because it was comfortable out there, my fingers busy shelling peas. I shielded my eyes with my hand, straining to see him.

"There's Gabe," I said unnecessarily, hearing the footsteps of Christine on the wooden boards of the porch.

"He has something in his arms," she said. "What is it?"

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I squinted. I could see that he walked with long strides like he always did but he put his feet down carefully like a man balancing a brimming bucket of water. As he came closer, I saw that his coat was wrapped about something and although his burden was carried high, the long hair dangled, curving across his arm, almost touching the ground.

"What is it?" asked Christine again, her voice harsh as if something in her throat hurt when she spoke.

"It's a girl," I said, startled. I stood up, "Perhaps she's hurt."

I WANTED to run and meet him but I stood very still. Both of us stood side by side and waited for him and, for the first time in a long time, Christine's hand fumbled for mine, Christine's fingers grew tight around mine.

And that's the way Gabe found us, hand in hand, standing on the steps as if we were barring his way.

"Christine," said Gabe.

At the sound of his voice, the girl in his arms lifted her head. Her eyes widened at the sight of us and she struggled for a moment in Gabe's arms.

"She's trembling," he said, "I'll take her in the house."

"Who is she?" I asked, knowing instinctively that Christine couldn't speak, knowing that I had to do it for her.

"I don't know." He put her down on the couch in the front parlor, "I don't know," he said, "but there's something strange." Gabe usually talked slowly like a man who thinks highly of words and tries to give them due measure but now he spoke so fast, I felt dizzy. "She doesn't answer when she's spoken to. How could I leave her? I thought I'd better bring her here until we can see what to do about her."

His words were in answer to my words but he looked at Christine while he spoke. I had seen that longing in Gabe's eyes before when he had tried to share the books and the music he loved with Christine; Christine, talking and laughing, indifferent, unaware of Gabe's eyes, hurt, pleading.

What could we do? I wondered staring at the slim figure on the couch, the hair curling about her like dried leaves, Gabe's coat still wrapped tight about her. She sat up and the coat opened.

"She's naked!" Mom stood in the doorway, her hands clasped in front of her the way she always places them when she's upset.

I sat next to the girl and pulled the coat tight about her, "She can have a dress of mine," I said quickly, "I can take her upstairs and—"

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Christine stared at us, her eyes enormous, terrified. "Take her away," she said, her voice high and thin, "I don't want her near me."

"Christine," said Mom, "What's the matter with you? This is just a poor lost child. You'll have to get in touch with someone in authority," Mom told Gabe, "Someone who will know what to do with her. She can't stay here."

"Why not?" I said, staring at the girl, fascinated.

"Someone's probably looking for her," said Mom.

"Take her away," said Christine backing against the wall as if she were being attacked, "I don't want to remember. Take her away."

We all were very still, listening to her footsteps running up the stairs and down the hall to her room, the house echoing with the sound of the slamming door.

THE girl on the couch hummed deep in her throat and something inside of me quickened. It was such a strange, wonderful sound that hum of hers. I thought that if only I could listen quietly, intently for a long time, it would begin to make sense for it had a rhythm and a pattern to it like another language that held a meaning deeper than any words could express. It was like music—like the sound of laughter, like the wind in the trees.

"What's wrong with Christine?" asked Gabe and there was an anger, a hardness in his voice that I had never heard before. It was as if Gabe, having heard a new language, had lost patience with the way Christine spoke the old.

"It's because this is a strange thing," said Mom in her quiet way, "You bring this girl to us, Gabe, and what are we going to do with her? Shall we say, 'How do you do?' and, 'Will you have a cup of tea?' "

"Maybe she's hungry," I said "Maybe if you—"

Mom took a deep breath and held out her hand, "Come with me," she said gently, "I'll take care of you."

The girl gave Gabe a quick glance as if she understood and was waiting for him to say yes or no. He nodded his head and she left the room, the coat still wrapped around her, Mom walking next to her, Mom looking very tall next to her because the girl was so tiny.

"Gabe," I said, "What are we going to do?"

"I'll tell the sheriff," he said, "and we'll watch the papers and see what happens. Melinda, what's wrong with Christine?"

"She's frightened," I said.

He shook his head, "It's more than that," he said, "There's

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hate. There was a time when I thought I could change her but now, I know I can't. Melinda," said Gabe, his mouth tight, "What am I going to do?"

"I don't know," I said.

There were so many things about Christine that I didn't understand—how could I help Gabe? There was her implacable fury when she was thwarted, her brooding silences after a quarrel that she could hold on to long after it was necessary so that I often apologized, knowing that I was not to blame but unable to bear her displeasure. I was baffled by her enjoyment of herself; Christine standing before the mirror, combing her hair, turning her head this way and that as if she were mesmerized by her own reflection; Christine loving beauty she could touch—a red ribbon, amber beads, a new dress, her own smooth skin.

I couldn't even understand her love for Gabe although I loved him too for Christine's love had nothing to do with the real Gabe at all. She saw a man who was tall and lean and young. She saw a man who had a house and who had land and who had stature because he taught in the school. She saw all the outward parts of Gabe but she yawned through his books and she fidgeted through the music he loved.

And Gabe? What about Gabe? He saw the way her eyelashes shadowed her cheek, the way her hair lifted in the wind, Gabe seeing the mirror-image of Christine, seeing only the lovely outline of Christine.

Now, I wondered, closing my own eyes for a moment as if in that way I could hide my thoughts from Gabe, now what does he see?

"I'll go to her," I said, "Don't worry about it, Gabe."

CHRISTINE was in her room, lying face down across her bed. I touched her shoulder.

"Melinda?"

"Yes," I said.

"Has she gone?"

"Mom is feeding her."

"Tell Gabe to take her away."

"Where do you want him to take her?" I tried to be reasonable, "Christine, please look at me. How can I talk to you if you won't look at me?"

She turned. Her eyes were swollen because she had been crying and, for a moment, I saw the way she would look when she was very old, the lines beginning to form even now, even in her twenties, the pinched, hard lines about her mouth and eyes.

"Where do you want him to take her?" I said again, "To the jail? To the hospital? To his house?" Gabe's house, I thought, empty and waiting for Christine.

"There must be some place,"

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she said. She put her head in her hands, "She can't stay here."

"What is it? Why are you so frightened?"

"I've seen her before." Her voice was so low that I had to lean forward to listen, lean forward until my cheek touched hers, "When I was lost, SHE was there."

"WHAT?"

"That time—in the woods," said Christine, lifting her head, her fingers digging into my arms, "She was there. I remember. I was running and running trying to find my way home and I got very tired. I sat down next to the big oak and she was standing inside of it as if she were standing in a doorway and she just looked at me."

"You dreamt it," I said shivering although the room was warm, although the sunlight lay in patterns on the counterpane of the bed, on our bare arms, "You were so little then. Why, I wasn't even born," I said, talking just to hear the sound of my own voice, my voice coming out of me brisk and normal the way it always does, "You weren't more than five years old, Christine, you couldn't possibly remember."

But, I thought, staring at her, I can remember things that happened when I was five. I had cried over a smashed doll; I had played games with acorns; I had dug up the garden, pulling up all my mother's tulip bulbs.

"I'll never forget," she said, "I wanted to run away but I couldn't. I was too frightened. And then, she put out her hand and made that funny sound in her throat and she touched me and I bit her hand. I remember that," said Christine with satisfaction, "I bit her until she screamed and then, I don't remember any more."

"You fell asleep," I said, "You dreamt the whole thing. When they found you, you were asleep. It's impossible," I hesitated, "She's too young." I tried to imagine someone who the years never touched, who stood, somehow, outside of time itself.

"Why has she come back?" said Christine, "I never told anyone about her. She didn't have to come back. She let Gabe find her. He never would have found her unless she let him."

I rubbed my arms and stood up, "What do you think she is?" I asked.

Christine's green eyes flickered, "She's something—she's not human."

I WALKED over to the window and pressed my cheek against the pane. The trees edged the fields, edged the horizon, the trees forming a boundary beyond which we could not go. The plow could go so far and no further;

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the roots reached out and caught at the instruments for digging, for furrowing, for reaping, the roots the first line of defense. And deep in the woods, hidden by the other trees, by the elms, by the maples, the pines, the beech trees, stood the oak.

What else was there in that forest, lying still, waiting, watching? Did they slip silently from tree to tree, the cloven-hoof ones with the pointed ears and the fur soft upon them, the ones who were not of the animals? How many woodland creatures were there? Once, long ago, they had been named; men sitting around the fire, glancing over their shoulders, men needing to name the nameless, men searching for the way past the boundary, men whispering the names —nymph, dryad, hamadryad, oread, faun, satyr and Pan.

"No," I said.

"What?"

"She's human," I said, "She breathes. She can be touched. She's sitting in our kitchen eating." I tried to laugh, "Come on, Christine," I coaxed, "It was just a dream. There are some dreams you can never forget. You just imagine she looks like the girl in your dreams."

"You think so?"

"Yes," I said, not knowing what I thought, only knowing that I had to go downstairs, that I had to see for myself.

I left her still sitting on the bed; Christine siiting on the edge of the bed, twisting her hands together as if she didn't know what else to do.

I ran down the stairs thinking I would see them in the kitchen, in the familiar, comfortable kitchen, the girl and Mom sitting at the round table, the girl sipping her tea or eating a sandwich and Mom moving about the way she always does in the kitchen as if that were the one place in the house that required constant movement, Mom never able to sit and relax there like the rest of us.

BUT the kitchen was empty and the voices came from the parlor. My father was there and my mother was there but Gabe was gone and the girl was nowhere in sight.

"Where is she?" I said.

My father was a big man with seams in his face, two lines that furrowed the sides of his face and his hands were always busy even when he was quiet; his hands lighting a pipe or carving a miniature basket out of a peach pit so that when I was a child, I used to stand next to him fascinated, amazed that hands so big were so deft.

"Gabe took her into town," my father said, "We thought it best."

"She could have stayed here."

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"She wouldn't," said my mother, "She wouldn't eat. She just looked at the food as if she had never seen such things before and when Gabe got up to leave, she made that sound in her throat and took off after him. I couldn't stop her."

Gabe, I thought, she came for Gabe. I shook my head, knowing that I was thinking nonsense, knowing that it was Gabe who had found her. But only because she let him, I told myself, imagining her lying within the tree, hidden within the tree, part of it, the soul of it, watching and waiting. Then, at the right moment, she stepped forward, pulling her hair about her, pulling the leaves about her, knowing that Gabe would see her, Gabe would find her. But the oak as I knew it was solid and firm, the trunk hard to the touch, the heavy-ridged surface of the trunk unbroken with no place, no space where anything could hide.

"Poor little thing," said Mom, "not being able to speak. Perhaps she ran away from some institution—Gabe will find out."

Gabe will find out, I thought; Gabe will discover who she is. But there was no comfort for me in the thought; there was no comfort, no peace for me anywhere in the house, not even after I told Christine she was gone, not after we had our dinner, the four of us sitting around the table as if this were any other evening. There was no comfort in the twilight or in the lamps going on or the stars coming out.

I stood on the front porch, not wanting to leave, not able to move, not able to go either in or out, standing on the front porch as if it were a platform in space, not part of the house and separate from the outdoors as well.

"Melinda," said Christine. She closed the door behind her, "Come with me. I'm going over to Gabe's."

"Tonight?"

"I must talk to him."

"But when you called him, he wasn't there," I said, "I heard you in the front hall. You kept saying his name while you tried to get his number." I bit my lip, hearing again the click, click of the dial under Christine's long, white fingers and her voice murmuring as if it had a life and a will of its own; Christine not even knowing she was speaking, not knowing she was whispering his name.

"He's there," said Christine, "I know he's there. And she's with him."

"Then he'd answer the 'phone," I said.

"Please, Melinda."

"I'll tell Mom," I said.

"She knows," said Christine.

"What does she know?"

"Just that we're going to Gabe's. Just that," said Christine.

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WE took the pick-up truck. Christine drove, her hands tight on the wheel. I huddled next to her, wishing I were home again, wishing that I were home and in my bed, the covers drawn tight around me, the covers warm around me.

"See," I said as we turned off the road, "The house is dark. He isn't there, Christine."

"Then, where?" she said, braking hard, "Where?"

"He must have stayed in town. Perhaps," I said, "They found out who she is. Perhaps—

"Do you really think so?"

"Oh, yes," I lied, "Of course, I do, Christine. That's exactly what happened and Gabe's waiting there, waiting for those she belongs to to come and get her. Christine," I said, "Let's go home. Please, let's go home."

But she turned left on the main road, turning toward town, the headlights making small things scurry for safety, both of us following the light, ignoring the darkness that closed behind us.

It was getting late now and the town, itself, was quiet; the stores closed, the streets empty, the people indoors knowing that there was no safety anywhere in the dark, the people moving indoors toward the familiar, toward the light.

Christine turned off the motor and we sat there for a moment, the two of us together.

"Come on," she said and I followed her obediently.

The sheriff's office was quiet with a single light burning and Tony, the deputy, with his feet up on the desk.

"No," he said, yawning, "I haven't seen Gabe for hours. He was in earlier with some girl, wanted us to put a tracer on her and then, the two of them left together. The last I heard he was buying her clothes."

I began to laugh, "Christine," I said, "here we're thinking—" I bent over double.

"I don't think it's funny," said Christine, "Thank you, Tony." She pulled me with her, her nails scratching my arm, "Melinda, stop it."

"But it is funny," I said, feeling almost normal once again, "This woodland sprite of yours is being clothed and bedecked and you're thinking—"

"You don't know what I'm thinking," said Christine, her mouth hard, "Don't be so sure you know what I'm thinking. Get in," she said.

"Stop pushing." I could feel the anger within me, the anger rising within me, "Stop it, Christine."

"I'm not afraid any more," said Christine, "I know just what she wants and she's not going to get it. Gabe is mine and I'm going to keep him."

"What are you talking about?"

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I asked, bewildered, "What—"

"No one," said Christine, turning on the ignition, "no one, no THING is going to take Gabe from me. If I'm given enough time, I'll cure him of his silly ways. Gabe took her home with him. I know Gabe, so innocent, so idealistic, so stupid, not even worrying about what people would think, not even worrying about what I would think. As if," said Christine, accelerating, "as if any of you know what I really think."

THIS is a time to be quiet, I thought, sitting next to her; this is a time for silence.

I held my breath when we passed Gabe's dark house, afraid she would stop but she drove past without turning her head, without saying a word and that was the way it was when I left her, when we turned away from each other, each of us going in a different direction, she to her bedroom and I, to mine.

I didn't expect to fall asleep. I expected to lie awake and toss and turn most of the night but I fell asleep so quickly that it almost frightened me; it was like a faint, like drowning and I knew nothing more until the morning.

But as early as I was up, Christine had been awake before me.

"She's gone out," said my mother handing me the orange juice, "What's wrong with her, Melinda?"

I took a deep breath, "I think," I said steadily, quietly, "that Christine is jealous."

"What?"

"It's that girl. She thinks Gabe is going to leave her for that girl."

"I think so too," said Mom walking over to the sink and leaning on it as if she were very tired, "I think so too."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's not what I'M talking about. Do you know how many 'phone calls I had this morning? Do you know that she and Gabe disappeared last night, that everyone assumed he took her home with him?"

I doubled up. I felt sick, not just emotionally but actually, physically, as if every part of me ached at once; my head pounding, my throat hurting; my legs throbbing, even the tips of my fingers pulsating with pain.

Did he take her home with him? I wondered, thinking of the dark house, the house that had shown no sign of life, or did she take him home with her?

I ran out of the house, slamming the door behind me. The woods, I thought, I have to see for myself. I had to go to the woods. I had to walk through the rustling, whispering woods and enter the clearing, enter the clearing where the sunlight

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comes down in a shaft the way it does in a cathedral, the sunlight having being, having shape only because of the shadows. I had to walk around that oak, move my fingers across the rough bark of the aged tree. If only, I thought, moving across the fields, my face turned to the woods, if only there really is an opening and they will let me enter, if but for a moment.

But when I reached the woods, I couldn't do it. I stood at the edge of the woods and told myself that I must go in but I couldn't do it. My legs wouldn't move at my command and I sat down on the grass, feeling the grass warm and alive under my fingers and I cried because I couldn't do it.

That was where I was found that afternoon and there was a grimness, a stillness, an anger in my father's face that I had never seen before.

HE took me home without saying a word to me and I was grateful for his silence, knowing that I couldn't speak either. I felt as if something were clamped across my throat, as if two hands were locked around my neck, the pressure holding me still.

But when I arrived home, I had to speak, had to force out the words, fighting the tightness, the clamping pressure upon me.

"What is it?" I cried, "What are you all doing here?"

There were so many of them, the men standing about the house and, in the middle, Christine, her face so white, her mouth so hard that she seemed to stand apart from all of them.

"We can't find Gabe," she said, "He's not in his house. He's not anywhere. And there have been no reports of a missing girl."

"Go in the house, Melinda," my father said.

"What are you going to do?" I touched his arm, "You must not" I said, "You mustn't do anything."

"We're just going to look for Gabe," said my father, his eyes flickering, "We're organizing search parties, that's all. What did you think we were going to do?"

"I'm going with you," I said.

"You had better stay here," said my father.

"Let her come," said Christine, "She knows."

I ran into the house. "What has she told you?" I asked Mom, "Please tell me what Christine has told you."

"Then you believe her?"

I stood still, "What do you mean?"

"We don't believe it," said Mom, "but just the same the woods should be searched. A man can't just disappear—"

"Not even if he wanted to?" I

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asked, "Not even if he realized he would be destroyed if he remained? Not even if he saw something so lovely, so wonderful that—"

"Melinda, darling," said my mother, "Please."

"I know what they're going to do," I said, "What good will it do to cut down the tree?" I covered my face with my hands, "I know how Christine thinks. I know how she'll make you think."

"It will make good firewood," said Mom clearly, "and if it makes Christine feel better, if it takes some of this wildness, some of this hate out of her, then, it will do good. There's nothing in that tree, Melinda," she said steadily, "I don't know where Gabe is but surely, we'll hear from him again, surely, he will return. There is a logical, reasonable explanation for this. Meanwhile, it's only a tree. What harm will it do to destroy it?"

I could hear the motors starting up, the cars beginning to move.

I RAN after them but they wouldn't stop. I ran across the fields, knowing that I could go faster that way, knowing that this time I would be able to enter those woods, able to move quickly.

"What harm will it do to destroy the tree?" my mother had asked.

What harm will it do? I wondered. What harm is there in destroying beauty? Throughout the ages, men have destroyed senselessly, scoffing, sneering, burning, torturing, fearing what they cannot understand, hating because of fear, of ignorance. Did I believe that the tree was no ordinary tree? Did I believe that this girl was no ordinary girl? Did I really believe that somewhere she and Gabe were moving together, moving into another world, a strange, wonderful world that existed only in myths, in men's imaginations? I didn't know then what I truly believed. I only knew that I had to reach the clearing before they did.

But it was impossible. I think I knew all along that it was impossible. There was the whine of the saw in the distance while I was still running through the outer fringe of the woods, the trees helping me with no branches whipping my face, tugging at my clothing. It was as if they were parting in front of me, opening in front of me, making a path for me to follow.

Even with their help, I was too late and knowing that I was too late, I stopped, not wanting to see that first cut for myself, knowing that even if I had been able to reach the tree first, there was no way for me to stop them, no way at all.

That was a long time ago, of

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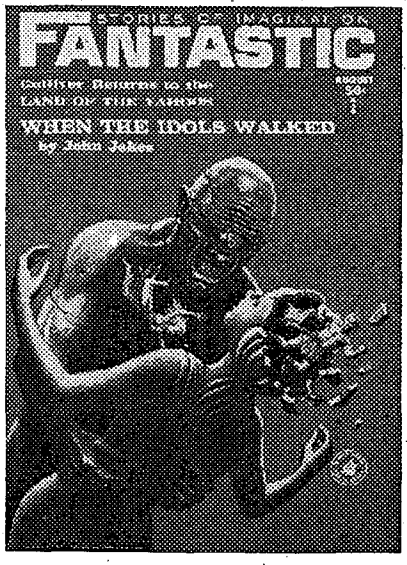
course, when I was seventeen and I read poetry and could lie for hours staring at the stars. That was a long time ago when grief held me still with shock. But now I am a woman, and something within me is stirring again like the new leaves in spring, like the rustling, drifting pods which seed themselves over and over again. Each night Christine goes to her room and I, to mine; each of us going in a different direction, for her love is lost and mine is yet to be found.

Sometimes, at night, when I can't sleep, I stand beside my window and watch the trees. The branches move like beckoning fingers, calling to me and there will come a time when I will answer, when I will walk in the woods again. There will come a time when I will run through the woods, young and free, but even in my happiness, I will never forget. And I stand at this window and remember, hearing once again the scream, the agonizing, harsh, unbearable scream of the dying oak.

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH



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The Venus Charm

By JACK SHARKEY

Illustrator ADRAGNA

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The amulet held unthinkable power: power of light, power of darkness. Trouble was, Rogan couldn't tell which was which.

WHEN Rogan came to, he was lying clear of the wreckage. How he'd escaped the holocaust that had fused steel fins to crystolite ports in an amorphous melange still too nearly molten to approach with comfort, he had no idea. Strapped about his waist, its ragged ends charred to black bubbles, was the nylon mesh safety belt that had secured him in place at his seat in the pilot cell toward the nose of the crumpled ship; had it been stronger, had it truly served its purpose, he would even now be a travesty of a living being, a contorted figure of calcium, iron and sooty carbon, somewhere within the smoking slag-heap that at his last recollection had been a sleek, soaring spaceship. With trembling, grateful fingers he now undid the clasp of that mercifully inadequate belt, and let it fall from about his waist to the gritty gray and white sand that had cushioned his—he could only assume—hurtling tumble.

Aside from a dull ache in his ribs—the jolt must certainly have driven the breath from his unconscious body—he could detect no damage to his person. The short-sleeved blouse and loose leggings were still intact, as were his duraflex boots and broad belt, nor could he find any damage to his flesh save a stiff, post-abrasion soreness along his left cheek and jawline where they'd scraped, then lain, upon the sand. His exploring fingers encountered an unwonted lump between blouse and chest, and then—even as his fingers withdrew it upon its slender cord—he remembered the charm he'd won from the Venusian attaché, Earthside, during an off-duty poker game with five idle spaceport loungers from as many planets. Valueless to Rogan, he had yet noted the esteem in which its whilom owner had held it, and for that reason alone had allowed the Venusian to stake it against the cards in the final

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hand of the game. The Venusian had begged him to hold off his departure until he could borrow funds equalling his debt to the Terran player, but Rogan had gotten field clearance for takeoff a half-hour before the time of the other's promised return with the cash, and—rather than be dropped back to the end of the long waiting list at the busy field—had considered the Venusian's loss just the fortunes of war, and taken off from his berth on schedule.

"Right into the roughest ether storm in the cosmos," he muttered, both bitter and wryly amused at the results of his action. Where his ship might be, now, he had no idea. It lay before him on the sandy soil of *somewhere*, certainly; but as to where in the universe that somewhere might be, Rogan had no idea. He'd barely set his course and plotted his vectors when the storm had caught the tiny ship in invisible walls of force, blacking out the ship's electric system, dissolving the control panel before his startled eyes into a melting plane of crackling flame—Then a sickening side-slip from reality as a short-circuiting electronic network cut in the hyperspace drive the fleeting instant before Rogan's battered consciousness gave way to merciful blankness.

OVERHEAD, the cold white stars lay across the dome of dark emerald night sky in unfamiliar configurations. A good space navigator might be able to divine his probable locale from those stars, taking magnitude- and location-variables into three-dimensional account—Rogan, never. He relied, and always had, on the ship's taped circuits that pre-set a pilot's cosmic vectors; punch a destination and count three while the automatic calculators did the rest. Simple, easy and—he realized now—perilously reliable.

Then, abruptly, Rogan threw back his head and laughed aloud as he realized the futility of his situation. "Even if I *had* studied navigation-in-depth," he thought ruefully, "a lot of good it would do me to know where in space I was at!" Because, he reflected, looking again upon the unrecognizable mass of the ship, wherever he was, he was there to stay. At least for quite awhile. Till he found a city—if there was one; a city with technological advances at the interstellar-travel level, at that.

There seemed no point in remaining alongside the ship any longer. It had carried him here, then died. And that was that. The surrounding terrain was barren of vegetation, and Rogan suspected that it would be a brutally hot place to trek in day-

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light. If he were to travel at all, it had best be now, while the cool of darkness persisted.

He turned the Venusian charm once between his fingers, then dropped it back within his blouse again, and began to walk toward the horizon, licking lips already slightly dessicated by the waterless atmosphere of the place, and trying not to let his mind dwell on memories of men he'd seen dead of thirst, in regions all too similar to his own enforced environs. "You'll find water," he told himself, and tried not to disbelieve this confident statement that had no basis in reason, only in mortal hope.

WALKING requires little thought; the legs move of their own accord once triggered by the mind, stopping only at that same mind's behest or the attainment of sudden pain or utter exhaustion. So Rogan's mind was free to ponder his path along that alien sand. It was idle bemusement more than concentrated thought, but the part of his mind that considered the locale, idly or not, made some interesting observations.

The terrain, it noted, was almost entirely featureless, an unusual aspect in a desert region. Not a bare outcropping of windworn rock, not a scraggly, tough-skinned travesty of a plant, not so much as a single dune rising before him like an ocean wave jelled in mid-surge. The only relief from total flatness was a sense of planetary curve between Rogan's area of existence and the always-retreating horizon. *Strange,* said the impartial observer in Rogan's mind.

And *wrong,* said Rogan, suddenly taking the mental reins.

He halted, pondering deeply, for the first time worried not so much at his overall situation as at the possible peril of his physical environment. Stooping, he took a pinch of the gray and white gritty stuff of the ground between thumb and forefinger, sniffed at and tasted it. "Resinous," he decided, puzzledly. "Definitely resinous. And—" he noted further, as he compressed a bit of it tightly between strong digits, "sticky." It was as though he were walking on the minute spheroids of, not windworn silicates but, crystallized *glue!*

Rogan stared at the flat gummy smears on the ball of thumb and finger, touched them lightly together, then slowly brought them apart again. Like a cobweb brought into instantaneous existence, a thousand fine, silvery strands extruded from the gray-white tackiness of the surfaces, bridging the gap with glistening, tangling filaments of treacherous adhesiveness . . .

"From *body* heat!" said Ro-

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gan, his voice choked small and echoless by the night-cloaked vastness about him. He knew not what star might service this planet as its sun. But it would be warm, far warmer than the constant heat of his blood. How *deep* could such a coating go?; he wondered, feeling a sudden premonitory chill along his spine. More than mere inches, or his feet would have scuffed it clear of what firm support lay beneath. His ship, he remembered, was more than half-buried in the at-first-supposed sand. A small ship, it was true; but far taller than his own six-feet-three . . .

Rogan straightened up and began to walk swiftly, much more swiftly than before. There had to be someplace beyond. Some spot on which he could be standing when this illusively firm ocean of grit became a choking quagmire of smothering glue. Rogan had no relish to be someday unearthed by some nameless alien archeologist, frozen like an insect in amber.

He slowed his pace for an instant when it occurred to him that his flight could be carrying him *deeper* into the desert, for all he knew, or even *toward* the point whereat the sun would arise at dawn. But, he realized, resurging forward, any such speculation was futile. He could not know, by any means at his disposal, which was the shortest route, the safest route. To continue might be foolhardy, but to remain where he stood was madness. His stride became an impatient jog, then a sprint; at first, steady-paced and controlled, but finally a blindly panicky run across the sands, the featureless, changeless sands that stretched before him as far as his staring eyes could see.

HIS throat was raw, his lungs aching, when the stars began to lose lustre, and the dome of dark emerald to glint with pale dustings of pink and yellow and orange. Rogan stopped, turned his head in all directions, trying to determine, in an onset of unreasoning despair, from which direction the sun was likely to appear, but he could not. "Don't be a fool," he urged himself. "You've come *this* far in a straight line. Moving in any other direction is useless." So he kept on. Kept on even when the first arc of burning sun showed itself over the edge of the planet almost directly before his frightened, perspiring face.

Already, as he ran, the spheroids of the gummy surface beneath his boot-soles were starting to melt, to fuse one to the other in a glistening, sticky mirror that showed him the inverted images of the climbing orb of sun and his own racing body. The tackiness began to tug at his

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feet . Wisps of extruded glue began fluttering behind his boots like tattered pennants. Each footfall seemed to sink deeper as he set it down, to pull free with a soft sucking noise as he continued onward.

Then he saw the shadow.

An untoward sight in the flat, smooth desert, the shadow stretched almost to his feet from the horizon which the burning sun was even then clearing, but retreated from him swiftly as the angle of sun and planet altered.

"Whatever it is," Rogan told himself grimly, "it has not melted in the heat. Even if its surface is white-hot steel, I'll climb upon it to fry to death before I let myself be pulled into this gray guck!" He followed the retreating shadow, knowing it had to lie no farther than the horizon, hoping the horizon was not so far off as it seemed. His last hundred yards were a nightmare. Ankle-deep, finally knee-deep, his motion slowed terrifyingly, as though he were a helpless animation on a film-frame in a projector that drooped its shutter with a languorous procrastination, more slowly by the moment, Rogan waded toward that solitary spot of safety and—scarcely able to credit his miraculous fortune—crawled onto it. It was many moments of agonizing slowness before he at last retrieved both feet from the clinging, resisting surface. Exhausted, he flopped onto his back, threw a forearm across his eyes to block the flaring globe of the sun, and lapsed into unconsciousness.

ROGAN awoke to a blaze of sun already beyond the zenith of a sky as bluegreen as a peacock's tailfeathers. Though he was uncomfortably warm, he was not sunburnt, nor did his probing tongue discover lips any more parched than when he had sprawled exhausted upon this solitary safety zone amid the fields of clinging grey-white menace. For the first time he began to investigate the nature of the surface on which he'd taken refuge.

A jutting, truncated elbow-thrust of solidity in the sea of glassy-smooth adhesion, the thing upon which he lay was soft as talc, and of a particularly loathsome fishbelly green in color. Yet, despite the smoothness, the configuration of the surface was ropy, as though coil upon coil of writhing cable-segments had tumbled in a heap, then petrified; the deep incisions of shadow beneath and between these arcing shapes mottled the otherwise pallid shade of his perch with lunes of sooty black.

His eyes, taking in the strangeness of his locale as he

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lay partially prone, partially propped up on one elbow, drifted beyond the rim of the talc-mound to the surface of the surrounding liquid. Something in the clarity of the reflected sun in that unrippling mirror, its image round as a dime, made him look a bit more closely at it. A separation seemed to have occurred in its depths.

The grey-white gluey stuff had settled, leaving a clear covering above, as melted fat rises to the surface of meat drippings in a bowl. Rogan scooped a palmful of the clear liquid to his dried lips and tasted it. It was water. Tasting just slightly of something akin to turpentine, it nevertheless could quench his thirst. He drank it hungrily, greedily, then got to his feet to better survey his incredible environs.

The colloidal part of the surrounding sea, even allowing for the distortion of refraction, must lie eight feet or more beneath the water, he realized. If he knew which way dry land lay—and how far—he could try to swim for it . . . Then he thought of nightfall, with the colloids sucking up the liquid once more, the crystals of irresistible sticky murk forming about his flailing, thrashing body, and abandoned the thought.

"A boat's what I need," he mused. "That's the only thing could keep me alive during the transitional stage of this mess." He kicked loose an experimental chunk of the ropy solid beneath him, not really hoping it would prove buoyant, and let it skid over the brink into the water. It sank out of sight into the grip of the cloudy glue-stuff far below the surface. "So much for wild schemes," he muttered, then chuckled as he imagined his own discomfiture even if it *had* floated; how he would hew a dugout from the soft stone even with his bare hands able to crumble its dusty substance, he had no idea. A boat was out of the question. Rogan sat down disconsolately on the edge of the talc-thing and tried to think of some other means of escape. True, his thirst was slaked, but hunger was growing in his viscera, demanding, debilitating his strength . . .

As he sat pondering what might well be his doom, his fingers toyed idly with the Venusian charm that still dangled about his throat. Without being more than casually curious, he glanced at it, turning it slowly between thumb and fingers, noting the fine craftsmanship of its construction. It reminded him vaguely of something.

Basically two interfitted halves, it combined cool white alabaster with warm, shiny jet, in matching portions of light and dark-

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ness, as though smoothly hemispheric octopi, one black as night, one a pallid albino, had meshed tentacles, or as though a pair of rounded, eight-fingered hands had clasped. *Black and white,* thought Rogan. *Day and night. Light and darkness.* Then the association of ideas plucked upon a chord of memory—"Yin and yang!" said Rogan. "Goodness intertwined with evil . . ."

HE recalled the oriental symbol, back on Earth, the flat circle divided into two curving tadpole-shapes, the head of each pursuing the tail of the other, and the philosophy of absolute equilibrium which had spawned that peculiar symbol. "Every good thing has its evil counterpart," he remembered, plumbing his mind for the elusive, ill-learned nature of that symbol. "For every act of evil that occurs, a good act is done to maintain the balance of nature. All joy is counterbalanced by sorrow, all courage by cowardice, all hate by love . . ."

Still staring at the sharp contrasts of the object in his hand, his mind leaped back to his own circumstances as they had eventuated ever since his winning of this bauble—or so he had deemed it then—from the Venusian: The good luck of getting clearance for takeoff, balanced with the ill luck of that ether storm; the good luck of surviving the plunge into, and emergence from, an unmonitored journey through hyperspace, contrasted with the near-fatal luck of the crash; but the crash itself mitigated by his miraculous escape from the molten ship, the hideous danger of the glue-fields overcome by his finding of this lone upthrusting dry area in the treacherous morass, and the dessication of the desert-warm sun balanced against the omnipresence of drinkable water when that sun was at its most blazing moment . . .

"Odd," he muttered, staring at the thing. "Almost too odd to be anything more than cosmic coincidence. Still—" Such a theory, put before a rational being, could not be put aside, forgotten, ignored. It demanded of reason that it be put to a test, that it be proven or disproven. "But how?;' wondered Rogan. "If I simply wait to see what will happen next, the outcome could be sheerest coincidence." He shivered at the momentary thought which had crossed his mind, and gave it a stern negative response, aloud. "And I'm not about to start swimming, just on the *theory* that the bad luck of this glue-ocean's recoagulation will necessarily be overcome by something salvational!"

He'd been turning it slowly in his fingers as he pondered, and

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the idea of positioning came to him almost immediately. The slow turning of the thing, he realized, might be keeping the forces of good and evil in a state of neutrality. He wondered—though he knew there was no longer any way to ascertain just how that black-and-white bauble had lain against his breast beneath the surface of his blouse—if the side toward the wearer was that which determined the sort of luck the wearer would have.

He could conjure up two theories on that, either as tenable as the other: white-side-in might bring good luck, black-side-in bad luck, by exerting its unknown influence over the wearer . . . Or—either side *out* might exert that influence over *events* . . .

There was but one way to find out.

Rogan carefully laid the bauble upon his breast, white half upon his flesh, black half outward. And waited. After many minutes, he could detect no change in himself or his environment, although—and this could be attributed merely to his concentrated preoccupation—his hunger-pangs seemed to have entirely abated. "They could come back, quite easily," he told himself. "Maybe they're just taking a breather, on their own. Empty stomachs don't growl *continually*, after all—" He waited a few more minutes, then shrugged and reversed the lie of the charm upon his chest, black side innermost . . .

He was pulled from his concentration by a sound, a hissing, fizzling sound of powerful effervescence, of seething, bubbling wetness. It came from just beyond the rim of the talc-thing on which he sat. Carefully, so as not to disturb the bauble, Rogan leaned to one side and peered down into the sunlit depths of the tranquil ocean beside his perch.

THINGS were swimming there. Ropy, tubular, eel-like things. They slithered and undulated in all directions in the water down there, their movement roiling up grey clouds of stickiness from the colloids beneath their passage. No, not *all* directions. Every direction save *toward* his perch . . . . But where were they coming *from?* he wondered, and leaned a bit further over so that his vista included the base of the talc-stone itself where it ramped steeply down into the surging colloidal grey . . .

"Eggs!" said Rogan, with a yelp of startled realization. "I'm sitting on a mound of eel-eggs! And they're hatching!"

Even while he got his wits together, the undersurfaced angle of his perch was diminishing as

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the pale green ropy "talc" flickered with sleekness, wriggled furiously, then burst away into sizzling, bubbling shards as the eager inmate found its freedom. "Good grief!" Rogan choked out, then remembered the black-and-white bauble upon his breast, and with fumbling, frantic fingers reversed it.

The hissing slowed, petered out, ceased. The last of the wriggling eels slithered off into the sea. The talc-thing was dormant once again.

"*Whew!*" gasped Rogan, wiping salty rivulets of sweat from his brow as he once more surveyed the area of safety remaining to him. The dusty, pale green surface seemed reduced by at least one-fourth. "A close one," he murmured. "A *very* close one!" he added, as the horrible thought came to him that the onset of eel-births might have happened *before* he learned the source of its instigation. The bauble was definitely dangerous to wear. And dangerous to throw away.

"Without it," he reasoned, "I'm at the mercy of anything this idiotic planet feels like dishing out. But *with* it—! I'm at the mercy of whatever position it happens to lie at any given moment . . ."

He had no means of securing it firmly against himself. A careful placement inside one of his boots *might* hold it in position, but—It'd be hell trying to walk with it there, and it could slowly turn about, after awhile, and bad luck would be beating him over the head while he frantically fought the securing-straps of the boot to get back at the thing. For that same reason, pressing it against his abdomen beneath his belt might occasion a fatal delay. "Besides," he thought abruptly, "it might only operate when held against the wearer's breast."

This theory was swiftly tested and proven. Only when the black side lay on his breast at the end of its cord did the eel-things begin to burst from the green eggshells once more, before Rogan reversed the bauble again and halted them.

HE thought only fleetingly of the glue-fields themselves. For a wild moment, he began to consider waiting until sunset, then plucking some of the reformed glue from beside the egg-mound and using it to stick the white side of the charm against his breast, more or less permanently, and start off toward the horizon over the sand-fine colloids, or crystals, or whatever they became at night, in perfect safety. There were at least three things wrong with this plan, he realized a scant moment after devising it:

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1) At night, the glue on the bauble would regain its sand-form, and allow the dangerous charm to swing freely, 2) on the following morning, even if he somehow survived the glue-phase of the transition into colloid-and-water, he would find himself swimming in a *solvent* of the glue he needed to hold the thing in place if dry land had not been reached, and 3) the thing was, after all, a *Venusian* artifact, and—the race being amphibious—even if he *held* it white-side-in when he sank into the sea, the bauble might not consider the new environment a menace, and would do nothing.

"Still," he frowned, pondering this last point, "it *did* seem to think a plunge into the water was bad luck, or it would not have started those eel-things hatching when I put the dark side down . . ." An unnerving idea came to him, then, and Rogan almost wept with frustration. "Or maybe I've figured *wrong!* The other things—the storm, the crash, and all—would be as bad for a Venusian as for me, but . . . Possibly having the black side inward was bringing me the *Venusian* 'good luck' of losing the perch. The bauble doesn't *know* what the wearer is doing. Its forces might assume that a Venusian lying out in the sun was unconscious, and try to help him into a happier environment."

It was maddening. Rogan held unthinkable power, the power for good fortune or evil, on a cord about his throat—And he still didn't know how to use it beneficially!

Other tests came to his mind, but he dismissed them as useless. He could, for instance, place white or black upon his breast and then attempt something harmful, like biting his tongue or pinching his flesh—But what could he prove by that? The bauble might consider "good luck" to be success in the attempt to hurt himself, or "bad luck" to be failure, mightn't it? "In fact—" Rogan said, nearly stupefied by the chilling philosophical insight he'd just had, "who *is* to say what's good or bad luck, in *any* case?! So much depends on one's viewpoint—Even death can be good luck under certain circumstances. Even simple circumstances like simply being tired of living. And how can I know what the bauble is going to decide is best for me?;" And then he knew at last that, with or without the bauble about his throat, the odds against outguessing the probable future remained the same: 50-50. "Because," he mused wearily, "nobody knows what's beneficial, really. It's that damned old 'blessing in disguise' bit! Out of

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evil may come forth good, sometimes, and vice-versa!"

Which explained, he understood all at once, why the creator of this charm, who must have known which half controlled good fortune and which controlled bad, had yet included *both* in its manufacture. Balance. Equilibrium. The teetering poise of the events of the cosmos must be maintained, at all costs. To have all good luck could be an evil, if only against one's less fortunate fellows; to have all bad luck could be a good, insofar as it taught the unlucky bearer the virtues of humility, courage and endurance . . .

"Still—" Rogan said slowly, staring at the gleaming halves of the charm in the reddening rays of the approaching sunset, "if I had my *choice* of the two—"

HE would choose only good luck. Who would not?! Selfish as such a desire might be, it was only natural to prefer good fortune to bad. And here in his hands, he thought, his mind trembling at the magnitude of the idea growing within it, he had his choice of either . . . All he need do would be to prise the intertwined halves apart—! Then select the good one . . .

Constructed from two discriminate substances, there had to be a way to get the twin-sized, seamless halves apart. "And in doing so," Rogan realized, "I will know which half is which!"

For it had come to his mind that no mucilage, no bolt, no welding had been necessary to join the twain. The very nature of what they were did the trick. The good half would cling hard lest relenting should admit the evil, ungoverned, into the universe; the evil would cling lest it were the cause of unbridled goodness being set free. Good could not do such an evil deed, nor evil such a good. Therefore, Rogan had the method by which they might be pried asunder. He would turn their own natures against them . . .

With thumb and forefinger of each hand he gripped the separate portions of the charm, black in his left fingers, white in his right. "Now," he willed fiercely, playing a psychological trick on his consciousness, "my hands tug apart, gently but firmly, yet —My right hand does *not* wish the white half to come free of its counterpart, but my left hand *does* wish to separate the black!"

His tugging produced no result. And so at last, he knew.

Knew that the white was good, for it had done as it was bidden; knew that the black was evil, for it had refused.

"Therefore," he said, shivering in near-frightened anticipation of what he was about to do, "I *reverse* my commands:

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"My right hand wants the white half to come free, my left does not want the black to do so! Whiteness—Release! Darkness—Hold fast!"

Soundlessly, sinuously, smoothly, the "limbs" of the two octopi, the two clasped round eight-fingered hands, slipped apart before Rogan's eyes into their basic components.

"I've done it!" he roared aloud in triumph.

And then—

Swifter than a flickering eyelid, than a striking snake, the eight limp limbs of each half lashed out, enwrapped, and clung like leaches to the balls of Rogan's left and right thumbs. And simultaneously—

Euphoria, serenity, surging ecstacy flooded through the entire right side of Rogan's body, while rending, agonizing, shrieking pain contorted his left . . .

As he staggered, spread-legged atop the egg-mound, a visible line of demarcation sundered the planetary surface before and behind him, and where his joyous right hand flung outward in happiness, the coagulating glue-sands vanished to be replaced by lush green arbors, rolling hills, cool blue streams, even as his throbbing, flailing left hand created a planetary chaos of boiling sulphur pots, boiling plumes of scorching flame, and a screaming wind of blackness and torment.

The sky to Rogan's right pulsed and glowed with a rainbow of sunset color and the slowly appearing blue-green mantle of night cooled by a billion sparkling stars, while the cosmos to his left exploded into flame and fusion and hurtling comets of illimitable debris . . .

The very fabric of existence began to fray along the plane of the terrible breach of all equilibrium of energy and matter . . .

Chronology itself was wrenched apart, slammed together again, overlapped, mingled, spun upside-down, for a tottering, whirling brush against the ageless matrix of infinitude . . .

* * *

". . . until I can return with the necessary cash," said the Venusian, dangling the bipartite bauble before Rogan's eyes.

Rogan looked at it, frowning. It seemed familiar to him, somehow. His hand reached out to it, then abruptly withdrew. "Hell," he said, "that's of no use to me. You can send me the money when you get it."

A light blinked on the wall over the exit.

"That's my clearance," sighed Rogan, getting up from the table. "See you guys around." He hurried through the doorway and trotted across the field to his waiting ship.

Blastoff and journey were uneventful. **THE END**

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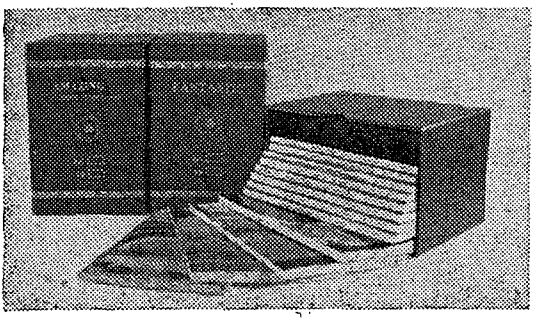

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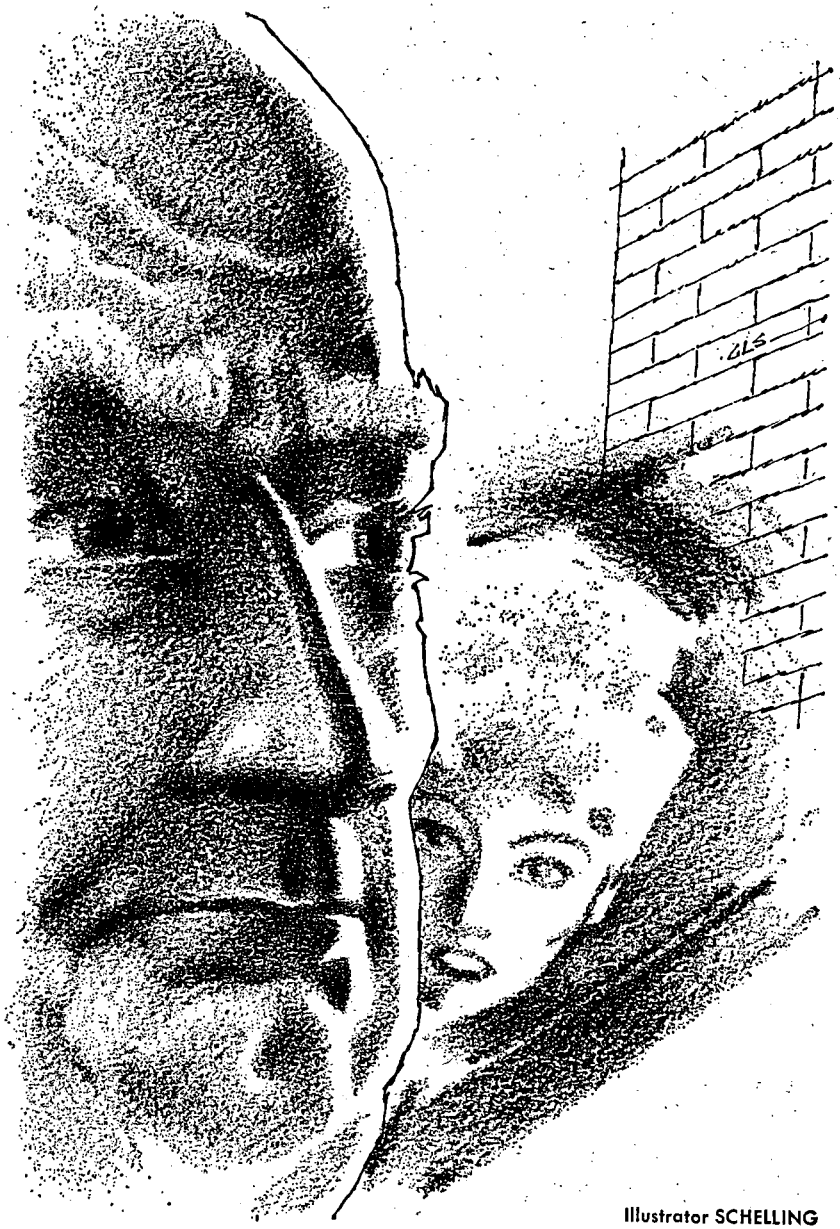

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the thousand injuries of mr. courtney

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

Our Mr. Young proves a deft borrower in this one: a pinch from Mr. Poe, a soupcon from M. Balzac, a drop or two from the long grey line of time-paradox-story writers. Et, voila!

MR. COURTNEY, *fils* owed his Christian name to a whimsy on the part of Mr. Courtney, *pere* and to a horror story on the part of Mr. Poe. However, it had not been Mr. Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" that had most fascinated Mr. Courtney, *fils* during the period in his youth when he gravitated toward macabre literature, but a horror story along similar lines by M. de Balzac. In later years Mr. Courtney returned to the story many times, and the more he reread it, the more his fascination grew and the more he thirsted for an opportunity to emulate M. de Balzac's protagonist. Hence, when he arrived home early one spring afternoon and deduced from his young wife's white face and her erratic behavior that she had a lover hidden in the bedroom closet, it is not surprising that he should have locked the closet door, pocketed the key, and made a beeline for the bricks which he had bought to build an outdoor fireplace.

The bricks were piled in the side yard, not far from the bedroom window, and it was the work of but a few minutes to remove the screen and toss enough of them into the bedroom to take care of the project he had in mind. Next, Mr. Courtney went down into the basement, got together cement, sand, lime, mortar-box, and trowel, and carried everything upstairs to the scene of the forthcoming operation, after which he got a pail of water from the ultra-modern kitchen. Grimly, he began mixing the mortar. Meanwhile, his wife Alicia stood white-faced and speech-

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less before the closet door, arms outstretched as though to protect whoever the closet contained.

The mortar mixed, Mr. Courtney got to his feet. The climactic point in the drama had arrived, and he carried it off admirably. Confronting Alicia, he demanded that she admit that there was someone in the closet, or swear by all that she held sacred that there was not. Apparently she divined his intentions for the first time, for the modicum of color that still remained in her face drained away, and she slipped senseless to the floor. The reaction was not strictly according to Hoyle, or rather, according to M. de Balzac, but it was good enough for Mr. Courtney. Dragging her to one side, he picked up his trowel and began laying bricks.

THINGS had gone swimmingly for Mr. Courtney ever since his first wife had died in a freak automobile accident and inadvertently given him access to the modest fortune which her father had left her and into which Mr. Courtney hitherto had been unable to dip his fingers. He had purchased a full partnership in the Cloverdale Research & Development Company where for a quarter of a century he had worked as an underpaid bookkeeper, then he had turned in his beat-up clunker for a be-chromed prestige-job and stepped into the charmed circle of the Cadillac set on whose perimeter he had hungrily lurked for years. It was "Mr. Courtney" and "sir" now, instead of "Court" and "Monty"; dry martinis in the Hamilton House, instead of fifteen-cent beers in the Blue Goose; a posh ranchstyle in Halcyon Acres, instead of a four-square frame dwelling on lowly Locust Street. Oh, he had it made, Mr. Courtney had, and if the secret project which the company had in the works panned out, he would have the whole wide world at his fingertips. It was the secret project, incidentally, that had prompted him to buy into the firm in the first place. As a matter of fact, if the truth were known, it was the secret project that had inspired the freak accident that had provided him with the requisite funds.

One might say that since the accident Mr. Courtney's one mistake had been his marrying Alicia. Strictly speaking, however, this had been more of a natural reaction than it had been a mistake. Blond and blue-eyed, lithe and lovely, Alicia epitomized the sort of dream girl middle-aged *nouveaux riches* associate with Cadillacs and caviar, and when Mr. Courtney had seen her standing like a dew-pearled goddess behind the counter of a business-

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man's restaurant in the nearby city of B——, he had no more been able to resist her than a kid with ten cents in his pocket can resist an ice-cream cone. Almost before he knew what had happened, he had a fine new wife to go with his fine new car and his fine new house; also, almost before he knew what had happened, his fine new wife began giving him reason to believe that she was two-timing him. If she really was, it could be said to her credit that up until that afternoon she had been most discreet about it, and in all probability a less astute—or possibly a less jealous—husband than Mr. Courtney would not have attached any undue significance to the frequent shopping trips she made to B——, nor to the absent-minded way she responded to middle-aged passion. However, it was necessary to get up pretty early in the morning in order to "fool" Mr. Courtney.

Well now, that ought to teach her, he thought, shoving the last brick into place and joining it to the lintel with a generous dab of mortar. All this while, not so much as a smidgin of sound had come from the closet, or if it had, he had not heard it. Probably whoever he had walled up had been so terrified that he had been unable to utter a word of protest. Apparently whoever it was was still too terrified to make his presence known, otherwise he would have been pounding on the walls by this time, and screaming at the top of his voice. Mr. Courtney rubbed his hands together, savoring the moment for all it was worth; then he went into his den, got the big silk screened bullfight poster which he had purchased on a recent trip to B——, brought it into the bedroom, and hung it in front of the brick wall. The camouflage was only temporary, and it was intended solely to convince Alicia that he meant business. As soon as she regained her senses she would undoubtedly admit that there *was* someone in the closet, whereupon Mr. Courtney would remove the poster, knock down the wall, and permit whoever was behind it to go his way in peace. Mr. Courtney's purpose was to teach a lesson, not to commit another murder.

The trouble was, that, while Alicia regained her senses, she did not regain her power of speech. After opening her eyes and sitting up, she spoke not a single word. She just sat there on the floor, staring with eyes at el toro and the matador. "Now see here, Alicia," Mr. Courtney said, becoming annoyed, "there's no need for all this. I'm not *really* the Comte de Merret, you know." (Alicia had read "La Grande Bretèche", too.) "All you have to do is admit that there *is* someone

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in the closet, and I'll knock the wall down and let him go. But if you *don't* admit it, then I can only assume that the closet is empty and that there's no imminent need for me to knock the wall down. The whole thing is up to you, you see."

She did not answer him.

She did not answer him later on either, when, returning to the bedroom after taking the trowel and mortar box back down to the basement, he repeated his proposition. She still sat on the bedroom floor, eyes fixed rigidly on the bullfight poster. Finally Mr. Courney gave up trying to reason with her, and hauled her over to the bed, took off her shoes, and drew the covers up to her chin. Then, after cleaning up the mess he had made, he went into the living room and poured himself a stiff gin and tonic.

MR. COURTNEY didn't mean to get stoned. Ordinarily, he was a sane and sensible man, and stayed well below his alcoholic threshold. But he had never walled anyone up in a closet before . . .

When he entered the bedroom the next morning after a stuporous night spent on the living-room sofa, Alicia was lying on her side, staring at the bullfight poster as though nothing else in the world existed. It occurred to him belatedly that if anyone *was* in the closet, whoever it was was undoubtedly dead from asphyxiation by this time, and that consequently his proposition had lost its teeth. Nevertheless, he brought it up again, repeating it three times so that she could not fail to understand. If she heard a single word he said, she gave not the slightest sign.

After a quick shave, he made coffee, drank three black cupfuls, and went to work. For a while he worried unremittingly, but gradually, as his crapulence left him and his interest in the secret project revived, enthusiasm replaced his anxiety, and his state of mind took a turn for the better. He had championed the project ever since buying into the firm, overriding the hardheaded objections of Charley Snowden, the company's chief engineer, and now it was beginning to look as though he had won. Yesterday, he and his partner Fred Greaves had sent back, and retrieved, a ballpoint fountain pen, and today they were going to try their luck with a hamster. Oh, it would be months yet before the machine was perfected to the point where a human life could be risked, but there was no doubt now but what that day would eventually come, and with it, fame and fortune.

His euphoria vanished when, upon arriving home that noon, he found Alicia still in bed and still

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staring at the bullfight poster. He wasted no time in summoning a doctor, and the doctor in turn wasted no time in summoning an ambulance. Alica recovered her voice temporarily while the emergency-relief squad was carrying her out on the stretcher. And how, she recovered it! Her screams were audible three blocks away.

From the hospital she was transferred to a private mental institution. Mr. Courtney went to see her several days later. If she knew who he was, she kept the knowledge a deep dark secret. The tentative diagnosis was catatonic schizophrenia, which, if correct, meant that Mr. Courtney need not concern himself about her telling anyone about his recent bricklaying activities. Not that the contingency had concerned him particularly; in his book, wives whose husbands bricked up lovers in bedroom closets weren't likely to go around bruiting the information. He signed the necessary papers to commit her until such time as the staff deemed her fit to be released, and left.

Back at the ranchstyle, he contemplated the bullfight poster. He might never know now whether he had walled up a paramour or a figment of his imagination. It was possible, of course —assuming the former to be the case—that someone had seen the man enter the house; but Mr. Courtney could hardly be expected to go around questioning his neighbors, especially in view of the dark looks some of them had been throwing his way since Alicia had been carried screaming from the house. Well then, since the man had undoubtedly come from the city, sooner or later there ought to be some mention of his disappearance in the metropolitan newspapers. Accordingly, Mr. Courtney began going through them every day; but he found nothing.

Maybe the closet was empty after all.

But it couldn't be! Surely, if something had not been amiss, Alicia would not have looked at him the way she had when she came out of the bedroom that afternoon and saw him walking down the hall. Surely, if she had not been hiding someone, she would not have screamed and tried to block the bedroom doorway, and afterward have run over and closed the closet door and planted herself before it. Surely, actions such as those on the part of one's wife spelled "guilt", not "innocence".

"I've had just about enough of this," Mr. Courtney said to Mr. Courtney one evening. "We'll knock the wall down, and settle the argument once and for all."

Straightway, he got a fourteen-pound sledge out of the base-

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ment, after which he removed the poster and readied himself for the first swing. But the first swing never materialized. Belatedly, Mr. Courtney discovered that he was a victim of necrophobia. Not to a degree where it bothered him under normal conditions, but definitely to a degree where it bothered him under the present ones. "Bothered" was hardly the word. Shuddering, he replaced the poster and returned the sledge to the basement.

SUMMER came along, set up its blue-sky tent, bleached out the greenery of spring, broke camp, and moved on. Mr. Courtney never went into the bedroom any more: he slept in the guest room now, with the door locked. Occasionally, he drove out to the institute to visit Alicia. Her condition remained unchanged. Every evening, he got stoned but good. All that kept him from going off the deep end altogether was the secret project. It was no longer proceeding quite so smoothly. He and Greaves had been sending animals back for some time—the last one had been a mongrel dog—but so far they had been unable to retrieve any of them. All of the kinks had been ironed out of the temporal element of the operation, but the spatial element continued to give them a hard time. They could send an animal back to the day before yesterday, for example, and calculate its arrival to the tenth of a second; but they could not calculate where it would arrive, and invariably, once it did arrive, it scampered out of the spatial zone and made retrieval impossible. Ideally, "where" should have been the transposition chamber, as this would have made retrieval simple and simultaneously would have provided the opportunity to check on future experiments before they were conducted. Space refused to co-operate, however, and the rematerialization area continued to remain a mystery.

The logical answer of course was to send back an animal that knew enough to remain in the spatial zone, or to return to the zone if it left, and that possessed the ability to tell where it had been, after it had been retrieved; but the trouble was, the only animal in this category set such a high price on his hide that risking it was out of the question. But was there really any risk involved? Mr. Courtney wondered, driving to the plant one morning. They had retrieved the fountain pen without any trouble, hadn't they? It hadn't been damaged in any way, had it? Granted, a man was not a fountain pen, but certainly he was not inferior to one, and anything a fountain pen could do, he ought to be able to

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do better. In a way it was detrimental to human dignity to place more faith in objects and animals than in oneself; definitely, it was detrimental to the financial future of the Cloverdale Research & Development Company. A man could advance the project more in one trip than a fountain pen could in forty. If he were the right man and if he were given the right temporal setup, he could—he could—

Amazed at the brilliant turn of his thoughts, Mr. Courtney finished the mental sentence while he waited for a red light: *He could take a surreptitious look-see into a certain ranchstyle on a certain afternoon and find out once and for all whether he was cuckold or a chump.*

BY the time he reached the plant, Mr. Courtney could hardly contain himself, and, in view of the fact that there was no reason why he should, he did not bother to. He was considerably let down when no one objected to his proposal. He had been prepared to argue his case till he was blue in the face, if necessary, and here he did not have to argue it at all! It was disillusioning to discover that one's fellowmen were as selfish as oneself; but then, Mr. Courtney supposed, it was no more than he should have expected. These days, everyone was out for his or hers.

So Mr. Courtney, resigned to man's inhumanity to man, nobly prepared himself for the supreme sacrifice. Magnanimously, he shook hands all around before stepping into the transposition chamber of the big jukebox-like machine; and he smiled a sad, brave smile. Having set the dials personally and having told his partner not to desist trying to retrieve him for at least twenty-four hours, he was not particularly worried about winding up in the wrong time-period or of being stranded in the past. Nevertheless, he *was* worried. For all he knew, he might materialize smack-dab in the middle of the Kremlin and be shot for a spy, or, even worse, pop into being in the office of the Commissioner of Internal Revenue and unwittingly precipitate an audit on his last income-tax return. In either case, his mission would come to naught, for both distance and difficulties would preclude his making the investigation he had in mind.

Charley Snowden, the chief engineer, threw the switch—with a certain amount of vindictive satisfaction, if you asked Mr. Courtney. He had suspected all along that the man did not like him. That was the trouble—no one liked him. He could think of a thousand injuries his fellowmen had inflicted upon him down through the years, driving him to

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this sad recourse and that; forcing him finally to wall one of them up in a bedroom closet. All his life, it seemed, people had done spiteful things behind his back, and now that he was Somebody, he had their jealousy to contend with, too . . . At this point, Mr. Courtney became aware that there was a grayness surrounding him—a ghastly swirling grayness that was turning his stomach upside down. He also became aware that his heart was throbbing like the rhythm section of a rock n'roll orchestra, and he realized that if things did not get back to normal and get back there soon there wasn't going to be a Mr. Courtney. Not a live Mr. Courtney, anyway. Fortunately—or unfortunately, as the case may be—things did, and he found himself standing in a pasture with three cows in it.

He identified the pasture almost immediately as a section of a small farm that lay about two miles outside of Cloverdale, and shortly he was walking along a dusty road in the direction of Halcyon Acres. He had gambled that an hour would provide him with sufficient time to reach his destination and complete his investigation before the crucial moment arrived, and it looked as though the gamble had been a good one. The trouble was, the transposition had snapped his strength to a degree where he could barely drag himself along the road. Worse, wave after wave of vertigo inundated him, each time leaving him soaked with clammy sweat. He persisted, however, and at last he reached the high ground upon which Halcyon Acres stood; but the ascent had winded him completely, and his chest pained him so acutely that every breath he took was a nightmare.

A GLANCE at his watch, which he had reset before entering the transposition chamber, made it clear to him that there wasn't time enough for him to let himself in through the basement window as he had originally planned on doing; hence, when he reached the house, he abandoned all thought of subterfuge and proceeded straight to the front door, opened it, and walked into the hall. Alicia came out of the living room when she heard his footsteps. "Why Monty," she said, "I didn't hear you drive in." And then, "Are you all right, darling?—you're as white as a ghost."

There was surprise in her eyes, but not the faintest vestige of guilt. However, Mr. Courtney was not fooled. "Where is he?" he gasped. "Did you hide him already?"

"Hide who, Monty?"

He brushed past her into the living room. There was no one

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there. He crossed the hall and entered the bedroom. There was no one there either. When he was halfway to the closet, a wave of vertigo stronger than its forerunners washed over him and sent him staggering against the wall. "Monty!" Alicia cried, running to his side. "You're ill! Let me call a doctor!"

He shoved her away. He had to find out, had to find out, had to find out . . . He was in the closet now, clawing at the walls to keep himself from falling. In the vast distance, a car door slammed . . . the front door of the house opened and closed, and footsteps sounded in the hall. Alicia's footsteps went to meet them . . . Abruptly she screamed. "Monty, it *can't* be you!" he heard her say. And then, "Don't go in there! If you value your sanity, don't go in!" More footsteps—hurried ones—and then the closing of the closet door. In the sudden darkness, Mr. Courtney slipped limply to the floor.

Other footsteps. *Click!* went the lock on the closet door. "Monty, no Monty—you don't understand!"

There was a brief silence, broken only by sporadic sobs. Presently loud *thumps* began resounding, as of heavy objects falling on the bedroom floor. At last the sounds died away, to be followed not long afterward by strange scraping noises; then these sounds too died away, and a familiar voice began speaking familiar words. Another, final, *thump* came, a gentle *thump* this time, as of a body slipping to the floor . . . Lying in the darkness, Mr. Courtney Future tried to scream. He couldn't. "For the love of God, Montresor," he whispered. "For the love of God!"

THE END

(*Continued from page 5*)
of what has been called "extra-ocular vision." One of the Soviet subjects identified color by placing her fingertip to the eyepiece of a device which generates all colors of the spectrum. The other development—not so pleasing to those who would like to think man has other senses—was that on a series of re-runs recently Mrs. Stanley test better than chance only rarely.

It is to be hoped that further testing will be done. For what a tragedy it would be should we fail to pursue evidence of a sixth sense in man: a sense that could not only be of practical value (i.e., in aiding the blind to "see") but that would lend support to those of us who have long believed that there are "more things in heav'n and earth than are dreamed of" by the mundane philosophers.—

NL

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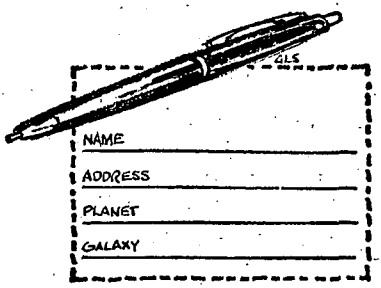

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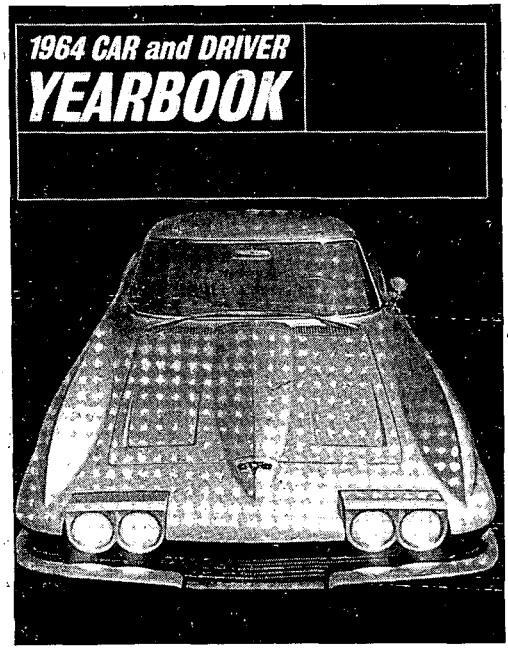

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